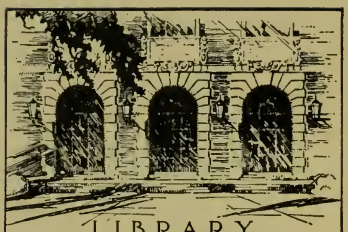

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MILDRED VERNON;

A TALE OF PARISIAN LIFE

IN THE

LAST DAYS OF THE MONARCHY.

BY

HAMILTON MURRAY.

" You're not a moral people, and you know it,
Without the aid of too sincere a poet."

BYRON.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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MILDRED VERNON.

CHAPTER I.

THE state of Sir Edward Vernon's pecuniary affairs was, as we have said, most alarming. When he resolved upon the sale of Vernon Place, he had literally nothing else in the world, which he could call his own, to sell. Farms in England and estates in Ireland had been converted into cash, to satisfy clamorous tradesmen, and cover debts of honour.

There was no way of making money disappear to which Sir Edward had not had recourse; he had played with absolute fury; he had betted on the turf, had gambled at

the Bourse; he had entered into speculations of every sort and kind, and everywhere he was unfortunate; or at least he was so far so, as to render his occasional gains mere incitements to further gambling, without being any compensation for his losses.

He was, as we have said, not only an imprudent, but also an unlucky man; and the whole of his fine fortune, left him by his father, and improved under Mr. Danvers's care, had paid for his folly and ill-luck.

His attachment to the Baroness had led him into a constant system of expenditure, from which—as she was a woman received in high society, of high birth and fortune herself—he derived no ostensible credit, but which would alone have occasioned him some embarrassment, and, added to this, there was no expensive habit which he had omitted to adopt.

When his family estate was sold, Sir Edward Vernon had before him no means of obtaining another shilling. Of the ninety odd thousand pounds the sale produced, what with mon-

strous debts and a disastrous enterprise into which he had been led by the cunning of a set of sharpers, there remained but a comparatively small sum to be devoured by the incessant exigencies of his unreformed position.

The severe losses he encountered upon the occasion of the last autumn races, made no slight inroad upon this, and the desperate attempts he tried at the Bourse, a few days after, forcibly to reconquer fortune, relentlessly swallowed up the rest. Then, commenced for Sir Edward that species of fictitious existence which must rapidly end in one complete crash. He borrowed money from one usurer at fifteen per cent, to repay him by loans made from another at twenty-five. Simple bills were no longer sufficient security for the rapacious sons of Israel, and the fatal *lettres de change* were resorted to as a last resource.

One economy Sir Edward had ventured upon. Under pretence that, during his wife's absence, he had no necessity for an entire hotel, he had given up the house in the Champs Elysées,

and taken an apartment in the Rue de la Paix. He had at the same time dismissed his numerous household, and sold some of his carriages and horses. But all this was done cautiously, for Sir Edward dreaded the surmises of the world, and, above all, the suspicions of Aurélie.

Towards the first days of November the amount of Sir Edward's debts to the Jew whom he had found the most practicable of the tribe was, in bills of exchange, three hundred thousand francs.* When these were presented, not only was no cash forthcoming to pay them, but more was required by the wretched borrower, to satisfy some urgent and immediate claims. When the whole matter was arranged, there stood to Vernon's account a sum of three hundred and sixty thousand francs (between fourteen and fifteen thousand pounds) to be paid upon the twentieth day of the month.

Sir Edward, like all inveterate gamblers, and men who are too weak to look their affairs

* Exactly twelve thousand pounds.

steadily in the face and take disorder by the horns, relied upon that chance which had so frequently deserted him, for repairing, this time triumphantly, all misfortunes. He had a speculation on foot connected with railroad shares, which, to his mind, presented a moral certainty of gain, and, on renewing his bills of exchange for the twentieth, he inwardly smiled at the thought that long before that term he should probably be a great capitalist.

The railroad scheme, however, proved, as many others have done, a dead failure, leaving its victims no consolation, save that of hearing those who advised them to it say, "Who would have thought it?" And on the twentieth, legal proceedings commenced against Sir Edward Vernon. These were likely to last a fortnight at least, and in that time he might retrieve his fortune a thousand times, and if the worst came to the worst, run down to Brussels.

In short, even then, Vernon would not look at things as they were, and the harassing idea of his own personal jeopardy was ever swallowed

up in the fear, more harassing still, of Madame de Cévèzes obtaining a clue to the facts as they really stood. The conviction, in the mind of M. Loisel, of his debtor's capability of paying, was so profound, that he had proceeded hitherto with a certain degree of reserve, and even when resorting to extremity, he did so gently. He thought that Vernon's must, in the end, prove an excellent job, and secretly trembled at the idea of his doing some other usurer the honour (if exasperated) of borrowing money from him.

When Sir Edward fled from the double scene of horror which had awaited him at Chavigny's house, he neither swerved to the right nor to the left, but went,—as horsemen shot through the heart have been known to do,—straight to his own door, and walked up to his own hearth. But here the force of impulsion ceased, and the unnatural semblance of vitality completely vanished.

Vernon had no sooner touched a chair, placed closed to the fire, than, with barely time to

raise his hand to his head, he sank upon the floor in unconscious helplessness. His valet flew to his assistance, and, placing him upon his bed, despatched one of his fellow-servants for the nearest medical aid. Before any one could be procured, Sir Edward had recovered, and, storming furiously at the notion of anything in the shape of a doctor, he desired to be left entirely to himself.

What Sir Edward's precise reflections were, it would be difficult to say; they jostled one another in his brain, so as to lose all individual character; but out of this chaos rose one ever-distinct form—pervading, colouring, embodying all in one: the agony-awakening, peace-destroying form of Aurélie!

There he sat! Hour after hour went by, and he moved not, unless to start from his chair with some hideous oath, and to sink down on it again powerless and spirit-quelled. The fire died away, and the day closed in; the lamps in the street alone threw their faint upward-struggling rays into that silent chamber,

and still the miserable inmate sat on. The fire was now quite extinct, and the cold external air penetrating into the well-defended room, made Vernon shake and quiver. For nearly four-and-twenty hours he had tasted no food, for the events of the past night had incapacitated him for breakfasting that morning, and nature now asserted her rights.

Ringing the bell, he desired that something to eat might be served, and a few moments afterwards, he attacked the viands and wine before him with a purely animal—an almost brutal—appetite. But the first mouthfuls were enough; and he turned in disgust, and ordered away the untasted food. The tumbler of wine, however, which he had tossed off in eager haste, took a nearly instantaneous effect on his brain.

Weakened by long fasting, nervous excitement, and mental anguish, Sir Edward was already lost in a state of dull forgetfulness when, seizing his candle with an unsteady hand, he crawled, shivering, and crushed in body and mind, to bed. Half uncon-

scious, he dropped upon his couch without undressing, and the heavy, leaden slumbers which sometimes visit those whose nerves are as much broken as their spirits, and whose physical strength and mental energies have been laid low at the same stroke—fell upon the swollen eye-lids of Sir Edward Vernon.

Long, uninterruptedly, did he sleep, and the repeated and violent ringing at the door-bell of his apartment towards ten o'clock, did not rouse him from what had the appearance of a lethargy. The grasp of his valet's hand upon his shoulder, timidly applied at first, and then more resolutely repeated, shook him from his unconsciousness, and he exchanged the stupid, vacant stare of his awakening for an angry scowl, and a muttered injunction to be left to sleep again. But the servant persisted.

"Sir," cried he. "Sir Edward!—for Heaven's sake, Sir,—awake! They are here with the commissary—they say they must have you, and the carriage is below to take you to prison!—for Heaven's sake, Sir!" continued the man,

trembling from fright,—" do not allow them to make a noise! Speak to them quietly,—there is no resisting them; the commissary is there with his scarf, and he forced his entry in spite of me, in the name of the law."

Sir Edward gathered together his scattered senses at this appeal.

"*I* did not kill him!" exclaimed he, wildly, his thoughts instantly reverting to the *one* event which had paralysed his senses.—" He had been dead four or five hours before I even saw him. I had nothing to do with it. He killed himself."

" But, Sir," interrupted the valet, if anything, more alarmed at these words, and thinking his master had gone mad, " there is, Heaven be praised! no question of killing or murder here. It is for money they are come; for bills of exchange due, Sir, to M. Loisel, who is here himself."

At this moment a hasty knocking at the room-door interrupted the colloquy, and the domestic answered the impatient summons,

assuring the commissary that Sir Edward would come directly.

"Look you here, my good fellow," said the commissary gruffly, through the half-opened door, "it will be of no use in your master trying to cheat us and get off; for I've stationed two of my men at the foot of each of the staircases in the house."

By this time Sir Edward had collected his senses, and remembered that the preceding day had it not been Sunday, was the first on which, after the delays accorded by the law, he could become liable to an arrest. In his present state of feeling, he cared little whether Sainte Pélagie or the Boulevard de Gand witnessed his sufferings; and, therefore, in a few seconds, he presented himself before the eyes of his impatient visitors. A few hours had so altered him, he was so livid, so haggard, so utterly undone, that the very Shylock himself was touched by something like a human sentiment. Stepping forwards to his debtor:

"*My Lord*," said M. Loisel, with the cringing

aspect natural to every Jew under the sun, "if you had not forced me to it, I never would have proceeded to such extremities, and I hope you will not visit it upon me in future, should you want any assistance, I, in my poor way, can lend; I really—"

"M. Loisel," interrupted Sir Edward, supporting himself against a chair, and casting on the money-lender the look of a death-wounded animal who turns on its pursuer, "you think I *can* pay, and that is why you have done this; but you are mistaken,—*I have not one farthing left.*"

This was said in a tone and manner that afforded no room for doubt. The usurer seemed, in the first moment, as thoroughly annihilated as his victim; but this quickly gave way to that peculiarly ferocious, because habitually compressed kind of rage, for which the race is so remarkable.

"Do your duty, then, to the utmost!" screamed the hideous little rascal, addressing two villanous-looking men, who stood sulkily

near the door. "Take him, seize him! he has robbed me of all I had!"

"Do me the favour to be calm, M. Loisel," said, rather sternly, the Commissary of Police; and, advancing politely towards Sir Edward, whose air of ill-health and obvious suffering had touched him: "the law, Sir," said he, "is obliged strictly to follow its course; but it is not held to any unnecessary severity, even towards absolute criminals: it is, on the contrary, enjoined to abstain from all gratuitous harshness. As your state of health seems to require attention, if it would be of any convenience to you, I will make my men retire into the next room whilst you take some refreshment; but you must promise that—"

"Promise!" ejaculated the enraged M. Loisel. "What do you think he cares for his promise? He does not even care for his signature!"

"Be silent, M. Loisel!" repeated harshly the man of law. "I forbid you to insult the prisoner."

"Insult, indeed!" muttered the money-lender.

"And who is most aggrieved here, I should like to know? Why, all that he possesses won't pay one hundredth portion of what he owes. That Vandyck up there, which is the best thing he has, is not worth, as times go, more than thirty thousand francs, though 'tis a well-known, historical picture; and as for all the rest—why, I know every earthly thing he has, and I tell you, I have been robbed, defrauded, swindled—"

"Be so good as to lead the way, Sir," said Vernon, with haughty civility, to the Commissary. "The only service I would claim from your courtesy is to deliver me, as quickly as possible, from the offensive impertinence of that person," pointing contemptuously to the Jew.

"Then, Sir, if you will designate the objects of mere personal apparel which you require, we will, if you please, proceed," replied the accommodating limb of the police.

Sir Edward's valet had, under the eyes of one of the officials present, made a small parcel of what he knew to be indispensable to his master, and the whole party moved towards the

door. They had descended a few steps, accompanied all the while, notwithstanding every effort on the part of the Commissary, by the groans and stifled imprecations of M. Loisel, when their progress was arrested by an individual, who was literally flying up the stairs with giant strides.

"Sir Edward Vernon!" said the man, with breathless haste, stumbling against the Jew.

"Go to the devil!" grunted the latter.

"Good Heaven! M. Garneron," cried Vernon, to the new comer. "What else has happened? What *can* you want?"

"Be so good as to remount those few steps, if you please," said M. Garneron to the Commissary.

"I protest against anything of the sort," cried Loisel, "I shall know no peace till I have seen him deposited in prison, and—"

"Hold your tongue," thundered M. Garneron. "Do you choose to have *that?* Yes, or no?" and he thrust, close under the sniffling nose of the Israelite, his clenched hand, filled with notes of the Bank of France.

M. Loisel's whole countenance and attitude underwent a total change.

"Ah! dear M. Garneron," he spluttered forth, in fawning accents, "let us come—let us go—let us see—let us hear—be quick! Oh! pray tell me all about it! What a relief!"

Without wasting a word on either debtor or creditor, M. Garneron, as soon as they had re-entered the apartment, addressed the Commissary of Police; and, when he had exposed his name, qualifications, &c., &c., he laid on the table, before the glistening glances of the money-lender, a heap of bank-notes, and a purse.

"Three hundred and sixty-five thousand, four hundred and forty francs, eighteen centimes," said he, slowly examining the papers laid before him. "There they are," and he counted out the last centime. The Jew's hands trembled with delight as he clutched at the money. Every one looked astonished—Sir Edward was stupified. "And now, Sir, begone instantaneously!" exclaimed M. Garneron, with honest indignation, to the Jew, who, however, before he

obeyed this injunction, approached Sir Edward, and with a sly, slimy smile, (such as a reptile would have if it could smile,)

"I knew you would pay, *my Lord!*" chuckled he; "and it was all a make-believe—a game! But—" (and his voice sunk to a whisper,) "never mind them; whenever you want money, come to Solomon Loisel; and pray, *my Lord*, don't be angry! How much will you sell that Vandyck?"

"Go — you audacious thief!" ejaculated Vernon, suddenly aroused from his state of mental apathy, during which he had mechanically allowed the usurer to chatter on; and, at the sound of his voice, the glance of his eye, and above all, the raised hand, Solomon Loisel was with one bound at the door, which he hastily closed after him.

In the meanwhile, M. Garneron had arranged matters with the Commissary, who, politely bowing, withdrew with his accolytes. M. Garneron remained alone with Sir Edward, who, for some moments, fixed a vacant stare upon his

liberator. At length, passing his hand over his forehead:

"What *is* all this?" said he, in a wavering tone. "Who has so promptly, and so generously, come to my aid? Can my old friend and guardian, Mr. Danvers, have heard—"

M. Garneron took his hat, and, buttoning up his coat: "*Monsieur Vernon*," said the *homme d'affaires*, with the grave look of an honest *bourgeois* who cares not to disguise how much his sense of morality has been shocked, "*you have a wife*, whom you would have done well to forget a little less—"

"Mildred!—Good Heaven!" exclaimed the unhappy man, sinking on a chair and burying his face in both his hands, as M. Garneron left the room.

And now, reader, you will perhaps ask, how came Lady Vernon to know of the exact moment at which she might interfere to save her husband? She knew of it, because Gaston de Montévreux, who thought of little else but her, watched narrowly the course of Sir Edward's

proceedings, and, when he discovered the turn affairs had taken, applied to Vernon's man of business, M. Garneron (luckily, a very honest person) and instantly acquainted Mildred with the precise state of the whole business, urging her prompt arrival in Paris. Upon the receipt of this letter, she left the Larches for London, without alleging any other occasion for her departure than the vague one conveyed by the word "*business.*"

The sale of Vernon Place was a fact hidden from no one—but it was supposed that Sir Edward, tired of his native land, and henceforth unfitted to appreciate its charms, had determined to settle, definitively, abroad; and, however all might regret this, no one supposed his fortune gone, and ruin staring him in the face.

Mildred's own fortune (her father's forty thousand pounds) was, happily, entirely and solely settled in her own hands. She sold out the half of it at once, without a thought, save that of saving her husband's honour, and hastened to Paris. At Dover she was detained

two days, no packet being able to put to sea, and thus, instead of reaching Paris on the Saturday, as she had calculated, she arrived only on the Monday, at half-past eight in the morning.

Driving immediately to M. Garneron's house, the address of which was furnished her by Gaston, she deposited the money in his hands, and waited there, by his permission, until, upon his return between eleven and twelve, she learned her husband's rescue, and agreed with him to proceed, on the morrow, to take measures for securing, at a sacrifice to herself, an independence to Sir Edward.

And then, where did Lady Vernon go?

Upon her arrival at Boulogne, the day before, she had read, in a French paper, the following passage: "Amongst the orators inscribed to speak upon the address, is the new deputy, the Duc de Montévreux;—his speech relates to the third paragraph—the question of the Pritchard Indemnity." On her arrival at her hotel, Mildred eagerly consulted the *Journal des*

Débats, and found, under the head of *Ordre du jour*, "Discussion on the Project of the Address —*third paragraph*." It was for *that* day! Gaston had followed her advice, had listened to her prayers—he had broken irrevocably with the past—he had launched forth into an uncertain future—a future of ceaseless activity, of incessant struggles—and this for her! And should she desert him now?

He, who had enabled her to save the honour of her name, he who, she felt, loved her far beyond every consideration of vanity or self—should not the first accents of his voice, raised in defence of a cause so newly his own, in support of a system—repudiated by those nearest to him by birth—should not those accents fall upon the ear of her who had principally inspired them?

Mildred hoped to obtain admittance into some corner of the *tribunes*, so well hidden that no eye should be able to detect her presence,—and accordingly, dressed in the simplest attire, and closely veiled, she stepped into a hackney

coach, drove to the Chamber, and, arriving there nearly an hour before the time appointed for the sitting, she contrived to establish herself (by means which all command) in exactly the position she desired.

She listened abstractedly to orator after orator, waiting only for *the one*. The torrent of M. Guizot's sonorous eloquence swept by, succeeded by the witty *causerie* of M. Thiers ; the clear, sound, sense of M. Duchâtel brought conviction to many an ear, and made way for the declamation of Berryer—and then, a general hush—a certain air of expectation :—a young deputy descended slowly the steps of the *centre droit*, and, amidst the suppressed murmurs of almost all the chamber, slowly ascended the Tribune. At that instant a ray of the wintry sun, gleaming through the skylight placed above the speaker's head, fell upon Gaston's face :—Mildred bent slightly forward—involuntarily ; but she fancied she saw his heart beat ! —He had seen her !

The young orator's speech was just what the

first speech should be, of a man who leaves the party which is by tradition his own. It was simple, unaffected, it rose to eloquence sometimes, but it persuaded every one (even those whose banner he had deserted) that it came from conviction, and was not calculated for effect.

When he descended from the Tribune he was surrounded by the most influential of the ministerial party, who heaped felicitations and praises upon him. In the midst of this triumph (and, whatever he may say, these *are* triumphs no intelligent being despises) Gaston's glance wandered to one only spot. Their eyes met! Gaston had gained the reward of his courageous conduct;—not in the plaudits of an admiring senate, but in that single tender look of one humidly-beaming eye.

CHAPTER II.

THE violent agitation Sir Edward had undergone, brought to bear, too, upon a frame already weakened by disease, could not fail of producing consequences immediate and disastrous. The day on which Lady Vernon had despatched M. Garneron to her husband's aid, did not pass without the manifestation of these consequences. Fever declared itself, and delirium followed, and when, on the next day, Mildred, after her proposed conference with the man of business, sought an interview with Sir Edward, she was absolutely denied admittance. She insisted, but even Sir Edward's valet (an old and faithful servant) who seemed to feel deeply

on the occasion, said to her, in so impressive a tone—"Indeed, indeed, my Lady, you had better not,"—that Mildred gave up the attempt.

She then saw the principal physician in attendance, and consented, at his urgent entreaty, not to persist in seeing her husband until he should be considered in a fair way towards recovery. But, the case standing thus, she decided, that as she could neither inhabit the same house with Sir Edward nor even be admitted into his presence, she must and would shut her own doors to every one who might, from kindliness or affection, wish to see and comfort her in her affliction. She wrote a few lines to the Duchesse de Montévreux, informing her of what she conceived it to be her duty to determine, and, condemning herself to absolute seclusion, awaited with resignation the coming of events.

She applied, however, in this emergency both to Mr. Danvers and to her cousin Philip, upon the discretion of both of whom she knew she could entirely rely, and whose advice, as her

only natural counsellors at such a crisis, she requested.

Philip Egerton's answer was, as might be expected, full of zeal, of practical good sense, and of heart. He offered to go to Paris instantly, to join his cousin, if that would be of any avail; and, in the meanwhile, he dated his letter from London, whither he had hastened without loss of time, in order to arrange matters personally with Mr. Danvers.

Lady Vernon, in her letters to both, had proposed, if her husband did not wish to put their means in common, and, re-uniting with her under the same roof, live upon the twelve hundred a year which remained to them, (to *her*, rather, though she was too generous to word it so,)—to divide her income, and, allowing herself six hundred a year, give him annually the remaining six, with the power of going whither he might choose. Neither Mr. Danvers, who had for Mildred the profoundest admiration and respect, nor Philip Egerton, who loved her with all his heart, would, however, listen to

this plan, conceived by her, for despoiling herself.

In Mr. Danvers's letter occurred this passage: "My will, as it stood yesterday, awarded, at my death, twenty thousand pounds to Edward Vernon; as it *now* stands, there is no need for my informing you how I have disposed ultimately of this sum. I will cause to be paid annually to Edward's account, the interest of one half of it, which, as it is placed, amounts to four hundred pounds;" and the rest of the letter referred to the arrangements irrevocably entered into by himself and Philip Egerton—and from no iota of which, would either consent to depart, for allowing to Sir Edward Vernon a yearly sum sufficient to enable him to live like a gentleman, (if he chose it,) in any part of the continent. Philip's letter, however, had in it touches of real sympathy, that did poor Lady Vernon's heart good to see.

"Dearest Milly," said he, "as to myself—why, I owe to your father's will, dictated by perhaps not a quite warrantable feeling of pride,

a fortune with which I scarce know what to do; and as to Mr. Danvers, your husband stands to him almost in the light of a son. We are both of us, luckily, better placed to aid you in this occurrence, than most people could be. Mr. Danvers has no children, nor even needy relations. I am a determined old bachelor. No! the d—'s in it, if I, who owe everything to your father, cannot do something for your husband, who, unworthy as he has proved, *is* your husband still. We will arrange it thus: Danvers gives four hundred a year, and I will do the same, which affords Edward Vernon eight hundred to spend as he lists, without touching a stiver of anybody's capital,—' and leaves Lady Vernon her twelve hundred a year,' says *wise* Mr. Danvers; but *not* so, say *I*. No! dear Milly, I know your heart, and I know that, from your little, you must also give something; but that something must be in proportion to your means; you shall give what will make your separate incomes equal; you shall give your two hundred a-year, which you can less well spare than we

can the double, and that is *why* you shall give it. Bless your noble heart! I have managed all this with Danvers, who thinks I am mad; but I told him he did not know *our* Milly, and that my arrangement *must* stand; so that settled the question."

And this arrangement *did* stand, to Mildred's great comfort and unspeakable gratitude; for she had felt, whilst making, in her simple-hearted sincerity, her first proposition to her two friends, that the mere division of what was left to her, since paying Sir Edward's debts, would barely afford to each of them (if he determined on separating their lots in life) the means—putting in practice every due principle of economy,—of leading an honourable and independent existence.

Time wore on, and at the end of three weeks, Sir Edward Vernon was able to breathe the air, and take in moderation what the doctors called, "walking exercise"—that is, when the day was comparatively mild, a species of mummy, wrapped up in great coats and cloaks, was

conveyed, in a well-closed carriage, to the Bois de Boulogne; and there, with the aid of an ever-watchful attendant, was allowed to potter about, or sit upon a bench for a quarter of an hour, and bask in the rare, pale rays of the winter's melancholy sun.

One day that he was there, so muffled up that none could recognize him, and in an alley so apart from the usually frequented paths of the wood, that he had thought himself secure from all eyes, the trot of a horse at full speed came short and rapid upon his ear, and, before he could rise, a lady had passed him, alone and attended only by a groom. It was Madame de Cévèzes.

He saw her distinctly—nay, more—he examined her every feature in the space of half a second, and, though she recognised no familiar form in the wretched valetudinarian whom her horse dashed disdainfully by, *he* had seen, with the miraculous vision of a lover and a man whose senses are sharpened by ill-health, that she, too, was not the same. She

was pale, she had lost her infantine bloom, her spring freshness; there was care now on her brow, and anxiety in her eye, and she was *alone;* she, Aurélie, the *lionne*, *alone!* That, of itself, spoke volumes.

On his return home, Sir Edward sent to ask whether Colonel Mowbray would consent to share an invalid's dinner with him; (Mowbray had, during his illness, alternated with the sick nurses, and he alone was permitted by the doctors to approach the patient's bed). The answer was brought by the Colonel himself, who, without remarking the unusual excitement of his friend's manner, the fevered colour on his cheek, or the strange brilliancy of his eye, was delighted to find him so much more lively, and could not sufficiently rejoice over the circumstance, that he now, for the first time, broached subjects on which he had never touched since his illness.

He spoke of the Baroness, much and often; he recurred to the subject; he put question on question to the Colonel, who did not, however, observe how pale he grew, nor how he internally

winced when Chavigny's name was mentioned; and Mowbray, once set upon the scent, with his awkward, off-hand sort of frankness, and utter ignorance of the finer chords of our wayward nature, constantly jarred upon Vernon's nerves, by plunging neck-and-crop into the past, just as he would into a thicket or a pond, at the tail of a fox.

It never entered into his brain that Sir Edward could now entertain any sentiment, save perhaps that of vengeance, towards Madame de Cévèzes. He would himself have felt contempt and indifference; but he allowed for what he called Vernon's folly and hot-headedness in these matters, and supposed he might hate the object of his former love, and not be at all sorry to be revenged upon her. Accordingly, he expatiated on the injury she had done herself, on the desertion of all her former friends, on her loss of even fashion, on her present state of loneliness, and, in short, on the punishment her conduct with Chavigny had drawn down upon her.

Vernon let the Colonel talk; was silent and abstracted where the chronicler thought to see

him rejoice, and smiled (faintly, it is true,) where, according to Mowbray, he ought to have been in a passion; and when, perceiving the evident fatigue of the barely convalescent invalid, the Colonel took his leave, the thoughts which assailed Sir Edward's brain were certainly any rather than those which his informant expected to have raised.

Aurélie was lonely, deserted, punished; she had suffered, in a word, for what *might* have been but an imprudence,—only an indiscretion. She was so giddy!—so fond of appearing worse than she really was! Chavigny was dead, and Sir Edward might think anything he chose. People's very worst actions often come from their very best feelings. Sir Edward Vernon was *good-hearted*, or what is called so; but, like many others, he was always so in the wrong place. In this instance, his good heart drove him to do that which was not only opposed to all that good principle could dictate, but to every rule and prescription of the merest worldly honour.

The next day saw him, at half-past one o'clock, (an hour when he was nearly certain to find the Baroness already dressed, and not yet gone out) descend from his carriage in the Rue de la Rochefoucauld. The bare possibility of his ever presenting himself at her door again, having never occurred to Aurélie, no orders had even been given about his admittance; he entered as would enter an habitual visitor, and, having previously been assured that the Baroness was alone, and arrogated to himself once more the privilege of desiring the *valet de chambre* to admit no one else to his lady's presence, he found himself again in the too familiar boudoir.

Aurélie was doing nothing. She was neither reading, writing, working, nor even playing with her dog. She was sitting on a low chair, with her feet on the fender, her arms crossed, and, to all appearance, plunged in a deep reverie. At the mention of Sir Edward's name, she actually started from her chair (Vernon's heart beat, for he thought it was with joy), and was on the point of angrily asking the footman

what he meant, when she found herself standing face to face with him she had deceived. As the servant closed the door, she resumed her seat, and politely motioned her guest to one opposite to her.

For some moments neither spoke, and each scanned the other minutely. If Sir Edward was altered, the Baroness was no less so in fact, though less fearfully so to the eye. He was more changed in body than in mind, she was more changed in mind than body. From a certain gravity in her manner, which Vernon did not perceive had merely replaced mirth by hardness and impenetrability, he at first augured well, and prepared to be severe, but generous.

"Aurélie," he began in a low tone of voice, "your conduct towards me has been unpardonable."

"Then, if so," replied she firmly, "why reproach me with it? When the sentence is irrevocably passed, there is no further use in consulting a jury as to the crime."

"But if," suggested he, still determined to

think that this coldness was affected, and put on to save her pride, "if, notwithstanding all—those who would be justified in condemning, were disposed to mercy?"

"Well, then," resumed she, "it is as I said; the offence is *not* unpardonable."

"Aurélie!" interrupted Sir Edward gravely, —"do not let us dispute, like two rival attornies, over the precise value of syllables. Since your pride will not suffer you to ask forgiveness of him you have injured, I will be generous to the last—I will offer it you;"—and he held out his hand. She took it carelessly, and he involuntarily shuddered at the icy, unsympathetic touch.

"*Mon dieu!*" said she, with a *nonchalant* smile, "there was little enough to forgive, in reality, if you knew all."

Sir Edward's eyes flashed with unexpected delight; his colour rose, he seized the Baroness's hands, and falling at her feet

"Aurélie!" cried he, in passionate accents, "tell me I am wrong, tell me I was unjust, I

will believe you; I will repay the conviction with my life!—but what do I ask?" added he, interrupting himself,—"you *have* already said so! those few words were sufficient, and I should not require more." And thus he continued for several minutes longer, alternating in one wild, weak rhapsody, his declared belief in her innocence, and his entreaties that she would condescend to justify herself. He had come determined to exact the substance of unequivocal repentance, and he was now more than content, enraptured, with the mere shadow of an implied vindication. But his demonstrations of joy were gradually chilled by the way in which they were received. The Baroness coldly listened to all he was pouring forth, and then, gently disengaging her hand,

"The *fact* may be true of what it pleases you to style my innocence," said she, with a smile, the fearfulness of which nothing can describe—"but I scarcely see what connection that fact has with you."

"Ah!" retorted he, trying to smile, and

clinging to the last hope he could conceive, "you are tormenting me as you used to do; but it is ungenerous, Aurélie;—I cannot bear it now, *méchante enfant!*" and the drawn and distended muscles of his wasted face tried to shape themselves into a playful air, as he caressed the Baroness's unresisting fingers.

Impatient at length, as it seemed, of all this, she turned round upon him. "And pray," said she, "what object can I have in either tormenting or deceiving you? Do me the favour to believe that I am doing neither the one nor the other;—why should I?"

There was in her countenance, as she looked steadfastly at Vernon, something that could not be mistaken. He sprang to his feet as though an asp had stung him:

"You have ceased to love me!" cried he.

"*Enfin!*" said the *lionne*, as though a load were taken from her breast, "with you, it seems, one must put the dots on all the i's;—you have been a long while finding that out!"

And then, reader, commenced a scene of

violence, such as I will not recount. Equal violence in recrimination and grief; reproaches followed entreaties, and imprecations, tears; at one moment despair dragged him to the feet of her who spurned him; at another his rage did not stop short even of threats; and to all this—to language in which she was alternately implored as an angel and reviled as the very last of her sex—Aurélie listened with a cold, contemptuous look that might have maddened and driven to desperation a cooler, wiser man than Sir Edward Vernon. At length, when he had exhausted every argument which grief, rage, despair, and passion could in turn suggest to his overheated brain, he had recourse to the last and worst: an appeal to self-interest.

"You are deserted by all the world," said he. "If you lose me, where will you find an arm that will support you through what you have yet to bear? Where a heart on which to rest your head?"

"As to the latter," replied Aurélie, with an expression of profound irony, "it may be all

very well in poetry; but as a pillow, eider down is far better than any heart; and as to the former, if you think Aurélie de Cévèzes and the world we live in can long remain on bad terms, you know neither the one nor the other."

"But what will become of you?" insisted Vernon. "What will you do?"

"Do!" exclaimed she. "Why, what so many others have done before me. Leave fashion alone on one side, and take hold of her on another. Devote myself to my health this summer at some bathing-place, and, next winter, open my house. *On dansera!* they none of them resist that. *On dansera!*" repeated she, with an accent of contempt worthy of Rachel.

"Upon my grave," groaned Sir Edward, sinking powerless into a chair.

"Ah, bah!" and the Baroness laughed for the first time;—but what a laugh!

Vernon seized both her hands in a grasp whence she could not extricate them; and, looking at her as though he would penetrate into the very inmost mysteries of her perverted

soul, "Woman!" cried he, "or rather devil, you *never* loved me!"

The look by which she answered his, was, to him, profound and inscrutable, as the depths of her own corruption. "I am not certain of *that*," answered she, coolly. "And, on the contrary, the anxiety I felt about my success, made me often think I *did*;—but I really imagined the enterprise would have been a less easy one."

"I do not understand you," interrupted Sir Edward. "What—"

"Well then, listen to me," replied she, "for it is as well you should; it may serve you for another time. When I heard you spoken of, I felt curious to see you. When I had seen you, my curiosity, still more excited, took another turn. I was anxious to know what impression such a child of Satan as myself could make on one of your countrymen, who, I was told, was defended by every device that religion, education, prejudice, early habits, and a handsome wife, could afford him! You know the result, *mon cher!* I tried, and was astonished

at the little resistance I had to overcome, and at the slight tenure on which English wives hold their conjugal happiness. *Allez*, Sir Edouard. The treble coat of mail of our experience is a better guard against attack than the white robe of your innocence. I *could* not have done with Lady Vernon's husband, had he been a Frenchman, what I have done with you."

Sir Edward still lingered on by the Baroness's side, till she had, one by one, trampled on and insulted every more manly feeling he possessed; and until he had appealed to, exhausted, returned to, again and again exhausted every hope, however distant, every doubt, however faint. At last he rose, and looked his last at her who had been his destroyer; over whom, in departing, he wept tears of bitter anguish, and to buy the return of whose love he would have paid the forfeit of his pride, his happiness, his honour.

When Sir Edward returned home, he found a note from his wife requesting (as she had now the doctor's permission to do so) to be

allowed to see him on the morrow, to speak upon business.

A few days before, this might have embarrassed Sir Edward Vernon;—now, it seemed as though he were steeled to whatever might occur, as though nothing could affect him, either in pleasure or pain. The answer told Lady Vernon that Sir Edward would wait at home the whole day, in order to receive her at the hour which should best suit her.

Early in the day, she came. Vernon rose at her approach, yet scarcely knew how to meet her; but she had too recently conferred on him a great service, bought at the cost of a great personal sacrifice, not to try, by every means her delicacy could suggest, to make him forget any obligation. She held out her hand in frank amity to her husband; but, as he took it, she started back, shocked — sincerely, profoundly so—at his appearance.

"Good Heaven, Edward!" she exclaimed, no longer in the timid voice her first words upon entering had betrayed, but in the steady, cordial

tone of heartfelt sympathy, "how ill you look! You have suffered dreadfully!" and the tears rose to her beautiful eyes.

Sir Edward raised his wife's hand with respectful tenderness, to his lips.

"Thank you, Mildred," said he. "I should have suffered more, if it had not been for you. I know," he continued, in a tone of deep feeling,—"I know all I owe to your generosity, all . . . "

"Hush, Edward!" said his blushing wife, putting her hand upon his lips, almost as playfully, as familiarly as in old times, so embarrassed was she at any allusion to what she had done,—"Hush! do not talk of what is past."

"Would to God I could forget it!" exclaimed he, wringing the hand he held in his. Lady Vernon only half understood his meaning.

"*I have* done so, already," interrupted she, with a generous smile.

"God bless you, Mildred!" rejoined her husband, solemnly; "If you *can* forgive me for

what has happened, the greater angel you; but I do not forgive myself."

"Who shall dare to judge?" replied Mildred, with humility. "Each should aid the other, but none should venture to condemn. Be at peace, Edward," she added, in a low voice, placing her hand again in his, with a look of angelic benignity, "*I have* forgiven."

"Then, may Heaven help me!" answered he. "It is more than I deserve; and now I can in truth depart in peace!"

"Depart!" echoed Lady Vernon. "Whither?"

"Indeed, I know not, Mildred;" was the answer; "but wherever may be farthest from this accursed place, and all which it contains."

"I had thought," rejoined she, timidly, and with downcast eyes, "I had hoped, that perhaps—" she hesitated. "Could we not go together?" she said, in a barely audible tone; (it seemed so strange to her to be the first to make such a proposition.)

"No, Mildred," replied he, touched to the heart, and in a melancholy voice, "it must not

be thought of. I am, I fear, past redemption. Do not turn from me in horror; perhaps the best act of my life has been the recognising my unworthiness. Should I ever become other than I am—should I ever be more fitted to share the life of pure, calm, happiness which you will prepare for all around you—believe me, Mildred, I will come to you; but, as it is, I feel that the seeds of dissipation sown in my miserable nature, have ripened into fruits which it is beyond my power to destroy."

"Is it then," asked his wife gently, "that—(forgive me, Edward, I do not wish to offend you)—that what is called bad society, has so many more attractions than any other? *has* vice in reality a charm, which to virtue is unknown?"

"Oh no! Mildred," replied Vernon, shaking his head mournfully. "There is much in all this which I cannot tell, and much you must not hear; but do not believe that that to which you—the gentle, the good, the pure—are sacrificed, has in reality any charm which in

you is wanting. Alas no! and therein lies the waywardness, the fatality! 'Tis a habit, a vile, enslaving, and most degrading habit; but those who have been led into the ways of corruption and vice, *are unfit to appreciate the joys of a domestic fire-side;* and when they deem the reverse, they but deceive themselves, and bring misery on whoever believes in them. I, who speak thus, in my heart I loathe those who have made me what I am; yet without the false excitement their society affords, I feel I should inevitably cut my throat. The same end may be attained both ways," muttered he; "but I have already said too much," and, suddenly changing the conversation, he began to speak on indifferent subjects.

At the end of an hour Mildred prepared to leave her husband. As she pressed his hand with an affectionate prayer for his well-being, Sir Edward imprinted a kiss on the forehead of his wife, and breathed a heartfelt blessing on her head.

And thus "they two parted!"

CHAPTER III.

Two months passed over; Sir Edward had left Paris a few days after his last interview with his wife, and, in the secure enjoyment of his diminished income, was living in Florence upon a thousand a year,—or, as the more magnificent French phrase went, twenty-five thousand francs—like a prince. Lady Vernon was still in Paris: two things had induced her to stay there; first, the arrival of Mr. Danvers and Lady Augusta; and next, (for I will not, reader, even for the sake of my heroine, pretend to anything that is not true,) because she felt Gaston's attachment for her was her only consolation, and dreaded no harm, real or even apparent, from his almost constant presence.

What induced the Danvers's to visit Paris was simply this: a very intimate friend of Lady Augusta's, a distant relation, indeed, Mrs. Chatterton Mildmay, had been suddenly called over to Ireland to attend the death-bed of her father, a fortnight after she had entered on the possession of a very handsome apartment in the Rue de Rivoli, which she had agreed to take for six months.

As Mrs. Mildmay was not only very rich but exceedingly good-natured, she offered her apartment to Lady Augusta Danvers, and persuaded her (no difficult matter,) that she would be doing her a kindness by, as it were, "keeping the rooms warm" for her, in case, when affairs were definitively settled, she might wish to return to them.

Over, then, came the Danvers's, and a pretty economy it was! and Lady Augusta was in such good humour, notwithstanding the undeniable immorality of Paris!

They begged Mildred would come and stay with them; but this she declined; and, taking a small and pretty apartment but a few doors from theirs, she saw quite as much of them as she wished, and yet preserved her own liberty of action. Lady Vernon was, however, very glad they *had* come; for, independently of the liking she felt for Lady Augusta, and the sincere and grateful affection inspired her by the excellent Mr. Danvers, their presence was a sort of protection for her, a kind of official guarantee to the world of her good conduct.

One thing, nevertheless, considerably disappointed Lady Augusta; it was the difficulty of penetrating into really good French society, and the natural consequence of which was that when she *did* give parties, (which she found herself forced to do sometimes,) she invariably contrived to fill her rooms with a collection of French faces which frightened and drove away for ever more the more respectable

portion of their compatriots whom she might have secured; whilst the English, (and those, *the very best*) who thronged her apartments, were showering invitations and civilities of all imaginable kinds, on these Pariahs of indigenous high society.

Gaston had, at Mildred's urgent request, invariably frequented Lady Augusta's dinners and routs, and had, in turn, given splendid entertainments to Mr. Danvers, whose character suited him, and of whose conduct in regard to Mildred and her husband, he knew enough to make him hold him in honour and reverence. But vain had been all Lady Vernon's endeavours and attempts to induce his mother to an acquaintance with her friends.

The Duchess laughed, said all sorts of pretty things, kissed Mildred's fair brow, as she would that of her own daughter—but opposed to all her entreaties a steady, firm refusal, that, for being disguised under politeness, was not one

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bit less hopeless. It was a wall of adamant hidden by flowers ;—so Mildred felt, and she desisted, notwithstanding all Lady Augusta's impatience.

Now poor Lady Augusta was the very best woman breathing ; but like, I am afraid, all our countrywomen, she was miserable if not invited. It was not that she cared for knowing such or such a person for *themselves*, to talk with them, to profit by their learning, experience or talents, to become their habitual acquaintance, perhaps even their friend—No ! she merely aspired to going where *every one* went. She could not bear the idea of any fête taking place to which she was not asked ; every party given, at which she was left out, seemed to her a personal grievance—a humiliation to be read upon her brow.

With the English she was pretty certain of her *cards ;*—she was assured of figuring upon the list of Lady A. and Lady B. and could feel

tolerably secure that the Duchess of C—— would not leave her out; but how shall I express her tortures when she heard or read of the *soirées* and concerts of the Marquise de M—— and the Comtesse de P——? Things beyond her reach—places forbidden to her. Any tolerable observer might have read her anxiety and vexation upon her countenance, every time she was convicted of *not* having been somewhere. If she had had a relative transported for life, and a sudden allusion had been publicly made to the fact, she could scarcely have looked more consciously discomfited than when some unlucky wight asked her whether she had been the night before at the Duchesse de N——'s?

Lady Augusta had in her head two crotchets, each equally developed: the one was the *Rout-and-Invito-mania* we have mentioned; the other, her attachment to the Evangelical doctrines. If she had not been previously assured of the

presence in Paris of an Evangelical parson, and of the existence of a considerable congregation of the faithful, she probably would not have ventured there; but being fully satisfied on that point, she determined to undertake her expedition into the interior of good French society.

She had heard there *was* such a thing, much as one hears of the sources of the Nile, and of elephantine burying-grounds in the interior of Africa, where elephants go and bury themselves —and she was resolved, in elegant phrase, to "get at it." But here, as we have seen, she was foiled.

She "*got at*" only those who were dying to be discovered; and, before six weeks were over, conceived a deplorable opinion of French people, French manners, French morals, and French society. She never cordially forgave Mildred her non-success with Madame de Montévreux; and could not help, in consequence, becoming sententious upon Mildred's own behaviour.

These were the reverses of the medal presented to Lady Vernon by the establishment of the Danvers's in Paris; but they were compensated by Lady Augusta's real worth, her good heart and good principles, and by the sterling kindness and fatherly affection of her amiable and excellent husband.

Mr. Danvers saw with pain his wife's little absurdities, and could not sometimes avoid telling her there was a want of dignity in her manner of hunting after invitations to the houses of people she knew not and who knew not her; besides this, Mr. Danvers was an Oxford high-churchman, inclining to Puseyism, and had an uncontrolled abhorrence of the Evangelical sect.

He spent a great portion of his time at Lady Vernon's. With Mildred he loved to talk, and consecrated to her the spare hours which remained to him when the day of occupied idleness, invented by his countrymen in Paris, had been duly filled; when he had well pondered

over Galignani's Messenger, read the English papers in Galignani's back shop, dropped in at Meurice's to see who was arrived, walked down the Rue de la Paix and up the Rue de Rivoli once or twice, and bargained with Madame Chevet for an inferior Strasbourg pie, whilst the incomparable *Foies de Canard*, from Toulouse, were wasting, unnoticed by him, their delicate perfume at his elbow.

When all this was done, and he had perhaps taken, under pretence of *luncheon*, the worst possible soup, or ice, or cakes, or no matter what trash, at the worst possible Britannic pastrycook's under the *Arcades*, he would lounge away hour upon hour in Mildred's drawing-room, wandering from astonishment to astonishment at every piece of news he heard; surprised at some important event all France had talked of for a week, as though you had told him St. Paul's had gone up in an air-balloon, and, it might be, ending by saying, what an Englishman propounded one day in the presence

of the author of this book: "I have often thought that, when one lives for any length of time in a foreign country, one ought *sometimes* to look at the national papers, just to see what's going on!"

But, nevertheless, Mr. Danvers was ever a welcome guest at Lady Vernon's; and a better-hearted, more sensible, more upright-minded man did not live, and that Mildred well knew. Besides, he was her refuge against all Lady Augusta's whims, and all her occasional attempts at being a little—but a very, *very* little—angry with Mildred.

One day they had all gone to the just-opened *salon*.* As they were sauntering down the long gallery, where every English visitor—supposing Horace Vernet to be the first of French painters—was arrested by the Daguerreotype-like precision, and what they were pleased to

* The annual exhibition of modern paintings in Paris is so called.

style "*nature*" of the portrait of the *Frère Philippe*,* Mildred, leaning on the arm of Mr. Danvers, and a little separated from Lady Augusta, who held that of a much too much decorated Russian Count, perceived before her a couple, the near vicinity of whom induced her to lead her companion a little further on.

"Who are they?" said Mr. Danvers. "The lady is very beautiful; but the man is about as ungentlemanlike a looking cur as it has often been my fate to behold."

"They are," replied Mildred smiling, "Lady Marion d'Arley—"

"What, d'Arley's wife?" interrupted Mr. Danvers.

"Exactly so," she rejoined, "and M. Paul Germain."

"Oh!" he answered, with a sly laugh; "I

* The portrait of the *Frère Philippe* was a picture by Vernet, in which, failing the sublimer qualities, the ideal, the principal merit was the exact delineation of a pair of spectacles upon a deal dresser.

recollect, I think; one of *our* pet victims, is he not?"

Mildred looked archly in his face. "Take care," whispered she. "If Lady Augusta be near, she will never forgive us; and not only her, but many others of our compatriots whom I could name. M. Germain is their idol. I really know not why, but the fact is thus; and when he wants to be admitted into any respectable French house, he applies for an introduction to the first English person who may happen to have the *entrée*."

"And how comes he to be so very intimate with Lady Marion, who I thought was rather a fine lady in her way?"

"Really," replied Mildred, "you will take me for what is called here a *mauvaise langue*, a scandal-monger, if I tell the truth; but the truth is too droll to be entirely withheld. In the first place, Lady Marion, though, as you say, a fine lady (and you do rightly to add 'in

her way'), has, like all such fine ladies, a great many weak points. She is not rich, and has expensive tastes; she likes, for instance, to go to first representations of new plays; and for such solemnities M. Germain has always a box. She wants to secure some '*attraction*' for a *soirée* she is going to give; and M. Germain has always his pockets full of wonders—*bonâ fide* prodigies."

"And pray," said Mr. Danvers, "how does he obtain all these treasures?"

"Oh! easily enough," answered his informant. "He enjoys just sufficient familiarity with a few journalists to make an author imagine he may be useful to him at a given moment; or, if necessary, he *tells* him he *will* be so; but that, to attain the desired end, he, Germain, must have a box. And so with the '*prodigies*;' he offers to take them somewhere where their gratuitous performance shall secure for them the sale of innumerable tickets for some future

concert. These are the wheels within wheels; these are the corks by which such men swim."

"But stay a moment," she added, looking eagerly in the direction of the side gallery. "Who are those two magnificent-looking women seated on the bench close by the door? There! —to the right hand," and Mildred directed Mr. Danvers's attention to the spot. "Surely I am not mistaken, and that is Lady Marston."

"You are right," rejoined her companion— "it is she."

"But who *is* the other?" pursued Mildred. "I never saw two more splendid-looking beings! —I did not think that Lady Marston could have found in the world any woman whose beauty should not pale before her's; but this one sits beside her as Minerva beside Juno."

They had approached somewhat nearer, and Mr. Danvers, touching Lady Vernon's arm, said suddenly to her in a whisper:

"Bless me, why, Lady Marston's friend is a

person of great renown, but whom you are too young to recollect in London. It is no other than the famous Marquise de Montdord herself."

"What, the cousin of the Duc de Vallerand?" said Mildred.

"Exactly so! and very handsome she still is."

"I thought she lived somewhere in the provinces," continued Mildred.

"I had heard so too," rejoined Mr. Danvers. "Nor did I know that she had been more than a mere casual acquaintance of Lady Marston's;—I am rather surprised at seeing them together; for the character of the one is as unblemished—as that of the other is spotted—at least, in her political capacity."

"What!" replied Lady Vernon, "is the Marquise's reputation then, so very, very...." She hesitated, and seemed to search for a word.

Mr. Danvers smiled, and, interrupting her, said

"Why it is not exactly so *very—very*—but it is what you may call a little faded; not quite gone, but as one should say sun-burnt—a sort of freckled character, and I *do* wonder at Lady Marston. But wait a little!" he added, stifling a laugh, "I am much mistaken, or we shall have a scene; we are not perceived: just watch well what is going to pass."

Lady Vernon watched, and saw at this moment a lady emerging from the *Galerie de bois*, in whom she recognised the Hon. Mrs. Starchley. The direction she was about to take must inevitably lead her directly in front of Lady Marston and the Marquise; and Mildred could not help smiling also at the probable dismay that she would experience.

Mrs. Starchley was the very impersonation of English prudery. She had all the pedantic ways of a woman who had had the honour of going to Court in the time of Queen Charlotte, of blessed memory, and none of the politeness

and amenity of those by-gone days. She curtsied perpendicularly, wore nothing that could bend, suffered no crease to rumple her dress, and, altogether, bore to a real living woman about the same resemblance that the composition roasts in a stove-maker's shop do to real sirloins and real fowls. It was hinted, too, that her toilette took a suspiciously short time, and a lady who had passed a week with her in a country-house, declared that the only portion of her morning's toilet duties for the performance of which she could venture to vouch, was the act of swallowing something in the shape of a poker which kept her straight for the rest of the day.

Straight she was, Heaven knows! and probably no hero was ever more determined to die in an upright posture than the Hon. Mrs. Starchley. "*Bolt upright*" seemed an expression invented for her; the very hair of the dark *toupet* that stood in forbidding awfulness

u pon her frowning brow, seemed rebellious to everything like the levelling influence of a brush, and thus, stiff, straight, and strict, did she mechanically pursue that hard, stony, narrow path yclept "the way that she should go."

Upon the arm of this Gorgon rested a much younger person, gentle-looking and very improperly pretty. Scarcely had the two turned from the side gallery into the great one, than Mrs. Starchley's friend was recognised—by whom? Oh! horror! by the Marquise de Montdord! Leaving her seat, she advanced, and, greeting the new-comer, the ladies were preparing to shake hands, when the terrible Mrs. Starchley turned round.

To paint the so-called "virtuous indignation" expressed by her countenance, would be impossible. She gave one dreadful glance at the Marquise, and, disengaging her arm from that of her companion, retreated as though the ghost of Jane Shore, Rosamond Clifford, or some other

such "improper" person had arisen before her.

Lady Marston, who, unnoticed, had witnessed this little scene, hid her laughter in the folds of her handkerchief: the Marquise was imperturbable, and went on talking to her recently-discovered friend as though nothing had occurred. The latter, however, looked confused and embarrassed, and, as soon as possible, escaped from Madame de Montdord, who, then carelessly taking Lady Marston's arm, moved together with her towards the *Galerie de bois*.

Mrs. Starchley's retreat brought her in immediate contact with Mr. Danvers, who, it must be avowed, did nothing to avoid her. As she came onward, fuming and chafing, more erect if possible than before, Mr. Danvers suddenly greeted her.

"You were speaking, I think, just now, to the Marquise de Montdord?" said he maliciously, at which Mildred could scarce prevent a

smile. "Very clever woman! a remarkable woman! Few women more remarkable than Mad—"

There is no saying how much further he might have proceeded had not Mrs. Starchley stopped him by a "*Mr. Danvers!*" uttered in an ominous tone, that would have sufficed to make the wicked blood run cold in the veins of Don Juan himself. The voice had a sort of trumpet sound, and Mr. Danvers accordingly held his peace.

"Mr. Danvers!" reiterated the incensed and virtuous matron. "I thought you knew me well enough to be certain that I could not be guilty of even allowing such a person as that, to address me. My niece (whom I have now chaperoned for the last time) has been, I find, imprudent enough to permit a kind of bowing acquaintance—and here are the consequences!"

"*Du reste*, my dear Madam," rejoined Mr. Danvers, "the Marquise is not quite so ill-

looked upon as formerly. She goes, I assure you to the best places—to all the Embassies for instance."

Mrs. Starchley smiled a grim smile of contemptuous doubt. "To all the *Foreign* ones perhaps," said she; "but not to *ours!* I should like to see her at *our* Embassy! I should like to see such women as Lady Marston, for example, associating with her!"

Neither Mildred nor Mr. Danvers ventured to undeceive her, for they rather feared the consequences of such a piece of unexpected intelligence: and so, on went Mrs. Starchley, thanking her God devoutly that there were such pure, reputable, places as the British Embassy, where people of Madame de Montdord's kind could not enter, and such dragons as Lady Marston to guard the entrance of such fairy-tale gardens of propriety. At length her erring niece approached towards her, and Lady Vernon drew away Mr. Danvers, little caring

to witness the first burst of Mrs. Starchley's virtuous fury.

When they had rejoined Lady Augusta, the signal for departure was given.

But now, the reader may ask, what had brought Madame de Montdord from her provincial residence, to confront such difficulties and dangers in Paris? And what had introduced her into the intimate society of such a woman as Lady Marston? The same answer will do for both questions. Her own intriguing spirit. When the Marquise retired to her château, she had found it difficult to compose her female society of any but foreigners, or ladies of a not very irreproachable cast. Among the foreign portion of her visitors, she contrived to attract Lady Marston, who was *femme politique* sufficient to like to talk with the depository of all the famous Duc de Vallerand's secrets.

Now, Lady Marston's virtue was some-

thing in its way all but as terrific as Mrs. Starchley's, and only saved by her marvellous beauty from being insupportable, yet she was touched by the affectionate reception she met with at Montdord, and resolved to give her friend the full benefit of her own reputation, and to bring her into all the circles in which she had any influence.

Madame de Montdord's delight was great. She followed Lady Marston to Paris; she was presented at the English Embassy; she was a *little* received by the English; she was a *little* suffered in the Faubourg St. Germain; she was a *little* visited by the virtuous; she had her *little* histories a *little* forgotten. In short, as all these "littles" magnified by her sanguine temperament, made, proverbially, a "mickle," she was enchanted with the success of her proceedings.

Still this could not be of long endurance, new *incartades* had already brought new

slander and new discomfiture; and it was evident that matters must relapse into their former state. The Faubourg, the prudes, the politicians, the court, would all soon draw back from her, and it became clear that one only plan would shortly remain for her: to cross the Rhine, invade the empire, take possession of a rich inheritance, and also invade society in Germany. But Lady Marston? It was easy to foresee that she would not soon be tempted to try so difficult an experiment. A slight degree of inevitable coldness ensued between the two ladies, but for the present, Madame la Marquise and her English friend were still intimate, and just on that fine frontier of female friendship the other side of which is called intimate enmity.

CHAPTER IV.

All women, in proportion as they really feel love, connect it with the idea of duration; and thus it is that so many of them fall into fits of melancholy, and look to death alone as the great and eternal uniter of hearts. Mildred gradually gave way, in some measure, to these gloomy thoughts, and, enthusiast as she had now become, sought, by an absolute and entire detachment from all wordly preoccupations, and by the exalted purity of her feelings towards him she loved, to sanctify what the mere fact of the passion itself might present of a less holy nature.

It would, perhaps, however exaggerated the

terms may seem, be more exact to say that she adored and worshipped Gaston, than that she loved him. Her attachment partook of the nature of idolatry, and she never for an instant, even mentally, lowered the idol from his pedestal in her heart.

This sometimes embarrassed M. de Montévreux, who, as we have said, though noble and high-minded to a very rare extent, was earthly, like most of his sex. Before the pure, serene, and utterly unselfish elevation of Mildred's sentiments for him, it was impossible not to blush for his own comparative unworthiness ; and there was in her devotion a sublimity, which, whilst it could not but flatter, kept him in constant check. He was, as it were, awed by the height and depth of the immeasurable passion he had inspired. And yet Gaston felt, day by day, the refining, ennobling influence of this attachment. He felt a kind of contemptuous pity for the denizens of the world in which he lived, and wrapped himself up solely and entirely in one feeling : his attachment for Mildred, and her's for him.

Gaston was not unhappy, but he was perpetually disturbed ;—full of fears and fancies, uneasy dreams of the future, and, every now and then, unhealthy, jealous forebodings. Mildred, on the contrary, though often silent, and what the world might call sad,—was ever tranquil and resigned. She had placed her love upon a pinnacle far above all the storms that agitate our troubled atmosphere, and whence she could calmly look down on the bursting thunder-clouds beneath. This constant attunement of her mind to the sublime, had, as it were, reflected itself upon her face. There shone forth upon her brow and in her eyes a silent harmony, a luminous, exalted purity, which told that in the depths of her soul were no thoughts of petty things.

Since her return to Paris one of Mildred's chief delights had been, to drive to the Valley of Montmorency and spend a few hours with Madame de Boislambert. She generally accomplished this once or twice in the week, without Lady Augusta discovering anything further than that Madame Fournier was an intimate friend of

Lady Vernon's, who had indubitably saved her life, and to whom Lady Vernon was much attached.

The Marquise knew the whole position of Mildred's guileless heart, and, with the very authority of her own so bitterly expiated fault, strengthened her friend in the path of Right, and aided her to find comfort in duty. The Abbé de Nangis, too, whom she frequently met, contributed not a little to the state of enthusiasm to which her mind was strung. There was in M. de Nangis a *visible* saintliness she had seen in none other before; and the Divine precepts fell from his lips with a mild holiness, a softened sanctity, that impressed and persuaded her to her very inmost soul.

On the last day of April, Mildred had gone down to Montmorency, to talk of Gaston to the Marquise, for, insensibly, that had now become the ever-recurring subject of their constant conversations. When she arrived at the cottage, the Abbé was there. Before him, as may be supposed, if she spoke of M. de Montévreux, it

was as an indifferent acquaintance; though M. de Nangis, from the quick insight into character which the habits of the confessional rapidly produce in an intelligent mind, had long guessed her secret, and watched, with approving pity, her struggles in behalf of her own good and holy cause. The conversation turned upon Madame de Moreton, of whom Madame de Boislambert had, two days previously, received news.

"Dear Clémentine!" said she. "How happy she is now! and how she deserves it! The birth of this son has been the crown to their felicity."

Lady Vernon sighed.

"If ever woman deserved happiness upon this earth," said the Abbé, "that woman was assuredly Madame de Moreton; for it was not that she was merely what the world terms an angel—that is, a model of gentleness and humility; she was also more than usually strong and firm in her resolves; and, when she knew herself to be in the right, had an active energy I have seen developed in few men; and which never gave way."

"You are quite right, M. le Curé," replied the Marquise. "Clémentine concealed the will and energy of a man, under the most beautiful feminine semblance, and in the softest of feminine hearts. How resolutely she pursued the work of her husband's redemption! How patiently she toiled, how courageously she bore up against neglect and suffering! How piously she relied upon help from the Fountain of all Mercy, and how humbly she ascribed all her success to the Divine Goodness!—Oh! yes," and the eyes of the Marquise filled with tears, "Clémentine's *is*, in truth, a noble character!"

"The duties of a wife," rejoined the Curé—"are not to be lightly fulfilled. They are sacred, and when she has not done *all* that she might in her conscience have done, *when she has left aught undone*, she has forfeited her trust, and has been false to the responsibility she assumed at the altar."

Mildred heard these words in silent terror, for she recognised herself as guilty for the first time. She had *not* done *all* she might have done—her conscience told her so distinctly; she

had left undone much;—*all* that Clémentine had so courageously, so unflinchingly performed! She ought not to have accepted so easily, so complacently, her husband's proposals for a separation; she ought to have followed him, to have sought gently, tenderly, to win him back.

She ought never to have admitted the possibility of a wife dividing her earthly lot from that of her husband. What if he had himself desired the separation, and what if she were virtuous? She had deserted her post, and no *real* virtue in a wife can compensate for the false *appearance* of her division from her life's lord. *His* was the arm on which she ought to lean;—and how could she answer it to herself, if, when he no longer withheld the support, she were not there to accept it?

Mildred felt humbled to the dust—for she had been hitherto exulting in what she thought her abnegation of self. She rose, and pretexting a visit to a poor neighbour, a former pensioner of her's, she sallied forth. She felt she must be alone, and that a firm resolve, a

great and definitive sacrifice, could alone restore to her the self-approbation she had now lost. Mildred! Pride lay at the bottom of this sorrow, and *that* must be crushed, before you can aspire to genuine self-esteem.

Lady Vernon wandered on, through the cottage-garden, into the lane; and as she passed the little gate which led into the park belonging to the house she had once inhabited, she perceived it was ajar. Animated by a vague desire to revisit once more the scenes where she had been so really happy, she opened the gate and strolled into the silent park.

The spring was unusually forward that year, in the valley. The tall trees had donned their brightest garment of green, and from lilac and laburnum hung purple and golden clusters of flowers. A few blossoms of the chestnut and white acacia had even, here and there, fallen upon the grass, and violets hid themselves in the brown moss at the foot of every shrub in the little wood.

Mildred walked on for some time, until

recollections of old times gathered round her so fast and thick, that they almost seemed to become palpable, and to impede her progress. She could not escape; she had come hither to steel her heart against him, to commune with herself, and school herself into obeying the stern dictates of her conscience—and now!

"Oh, Gaston! Gaston!" said Mildred's heart, and she sank upon a bench where they had often sat together, and burst into a flood of tears.

Long did she weep, and bitterly; for the *real* struggle had now begun;—the struggle which must end in banishing her from him.

Hitherto, circumstances, as she chose to call them, and to which she chose too readily to yield, had connived at the possibility of her enjoying the constant society of him she loved: she had daily heard the passionate assurances of his love poured into her too willing ear—daily had she responded thereto by the recital of an affection which, after all, though innocent, was unhallowed. She had done all this, and had, while doing so, secretly deemed herself

the most virtuous of women. Virtuous! whilst, in fact, she was but naturally pure-minded, and whilst she had not called upon herself to forego one single joy a pure-minded attachment desires.

Lady Vernon rose, faint and trembling, but determined; a shadow was on the path—another besides her own. She turned, half fearing to see him whom she felt was there, and, imploringly raising her hands, clasped together in a last effort, fell senseless at Gaston's feet, with his name expiring on her lips. When she recovered, M. de Montévreux was kneeling by her, supporting her head upon his breast, and chafing her icy hands in his. Her eyes rested languidly, and, at first, almost unconsciously, upon his; but, as consciousness returned, the suffering became intense.

The expression, too, of M. de Montévreux's countenance was, at that moment, so in unison with her own thoughts; she read on his pale cheek and quivering lips, such anxiety, such undeniable wretchedness, that, like all women,

her first thought was to console. She would not have been woman had it not been so.

"Gaston," faltered she; but she could say no more, and, burying her head involuntarily in her lover's bosom, she burst forth into sobs of convulsive agony.

"Mildred," he replied, in a broken voice, when she was somewhat calmed, and as he still held her fondly in his arms, "Mildred, *can* you leave me?"

She started. "How could you guess?" she cried.

"Guess!" he echoed. "Oh! my own Mildred, you know little of love such as mine, if you think that your thoughts can be hidden from me. I arrived at Madame de Boislambert's a few seconds after you had left. I easily discovered what had been the subject of conversation, and my instinct told me the rest."

Lady Vernon hung down her head at these words. Nothing seemed to her to prove more thoroughly the divineness of their affection, than this supernatural kind of divination, this

magnetic quickening of all the senses, which she had often wondered at in her lover, and which instinctively convinced her of his entire truth, and of a certain sublime something in the passion he felt for her, which she often *dared* not resist.

Bending over her, tenderly, Gaston kissed the tears from the cold, blanched cheek of his beloved, and, pressing her still more closely to his beating—oh ! how wildly beating heart !

"Mildred !" said he again, "will you, *can* you leave me ?"

"My heart, my soul, I fear, will never leave you more," she answered, in trembling accents. "But I have *not* acted as I should—I have a duty unperformed—"

"And have you none towards me ?" he asked, in that tone which real affection gives. "Has your heart no yearning towards the being who is so wholly yours ; have you no desire to support my loneliness, to console my entire desolation ? What have I been guilty of towards you ? What ! save loving you as never

man loved woman, and as I never thought *I* could love. Mildred! without you I am alone in the world; you are my only hope, my light, my life! I cannot, will not, live where you are not. Will you leave me, Mildred? How often have you told me your heart was all my own; was *that* true? and will you desert me? When you have refused to fly with me to the untrodden deserts, where we might hide our love, to the fair perfumed isles of the warm East, towards which I have vainly tried to tempt you; what has been your reply? An eternal, ever-repeated vow that you would never leave me! that now, you *feared* nothing, and that there, where I was, you would remain.

"Mildred!" he exclaimed, passionately, "you will never be mine, I know it; I am resigned to it; your honour, your merest wish is dearer to me than life; you do not fear me; but where, when those angel eyes are no longer near to calm me, where shall I turn for the assurance that I am loved? I can bear anything, I can defy all pain, suffering, misfortune, misery; but

I *cannot* bear your loss. Mildred! Mildred! will you leave me?"

Gaston sank upon his knee before Mildred, whose trembling hand he held in his, and covered with passionate tears and kisses. She leaned against the stem of a tall acacia; her head bent down slightly upon her right shoulder, and her long dark hair hung carelessly over her face and neck. Her whole attitude was expressive of the profoundest dejection. Raising her melancholy eyes to Gaston's,

"I will *not* leave you," said she, almost inaudibly; "but may God in his mercy forgive me!"

If anything could call down the Divine Mercy upon Mildred, it was that she had now, for the first time, made a real and sincere sacrifice; she had sacrificed her pride, and a desire for self-approbation, rather than a wish to fulfil her duty; she had sacrificed her pride, and no longer thought highly of herself because her honour was unscathed.

CHAPTER V.

THE next day was the *fête* of St. Philip the King's *fête*-day; and, much to her annoyance, Lady Vernon was obliged to keep a promise made to Lady Augusta, of accompanying her to all the public rejoicings in the Champs-Elysées. Disagreeable enough it was for poor Mildred, after all the emotions of the preceding day, to be exposed to the discomfort of such noisy festivities; but she dared not refuse Lady Augusta at this moment, for she clearly perceived she was beginning to be considerably out of favour; and, for the sake of Mr. Danvers, she resolved to do nothing which could, in the remotest degree, displease or vex his wife.

To the Champs-Elysées, then, they went, on foot, (as no carriages could pass) and in the heat of a noon-day sun, such as would not have disgraced that which shone upon the three glorious days of the Revolution of July.

Mr. Danvers was really anxious to observe the people in their amusements, and to study the physiognomy of the lower orders; and Lady Augusta was determined to "see everything," as she said, and be duly astonished at the great difference which exists between the natural gaiety of the French people and that of the *mob* at home. She was, however, grievously disappointed at the very small expenditure of gaiety made by the so-called "gayest nation on the earth," and was quite satisfied that a fair in England, or a vintage in Germany, gave loose to more genuine merriment than any that was displayed by what we persist in considering as a people wholly given up to its pleasures, and pastimes.

Idle, the French lower orders certainly are; but they are not *gay*. The voluntary waste of time is a characteristic not only of the *ouvrier*,

but of all who work, up to a far higher class than would be supposed. But there is not in the national character enough simplicity, enough innocence to produce what is rightly called mirth. The French are neither a light-headed, nor a light-hearted nation. They have changed less than we imagine since the Revolution of 1830; and though the *Faubourien* may have *thought* perhaps a little more since he has falsely dreamed that every career was opened to his ambition, I doubt whether he be, in fact, much more serious under the new than under the *ancien Régime*.

The French *people* never were an *insouciant* race, such as we choose to imagine them; the *noblesse* was so, indeed; but the unsteadiness of purpose, the giddy gallantry, the carelessness of the morrow, the blindness to the events of to-day, which counterbalanced the chivalrous feelings of the upper ranks in France, descended not into the inferior strata of society, and the French artisan, labourer, peasant or mechanic, is no more, nor ever was, the frank, jovial

fellow we have chosen to represent to ourselves than the pudding-cheeked, fat-kneed, bald-headed old gentleman, recognised by our neighbours as John Bull, resembles the spruce, dapper clerk of some city house, or a waterman on the Thames.

Cloud of dust on cloud of dust rolled up the Avenue de Neuilly, whitening the trees and the many-coloured dresses of the crowd; noise atrocious broke forth on every side; drum answered drum, and *cornet-à-piston* trumpet, in one incessant, universal din. From the Carré de Marigny came the peals of musquetry necessary to the performance of the dramas in the open air which so fascinate a Parisian rabble, and in which Arabs (they being now the popular victims) fall like flies before the fatal fire of the French, and lie in bleeding heaps on the stage. Monsters of every species, giants and boas, dwarfs and two-headed children, announced their presence by paintings hung outside their caravans; from every booth came the nauseous smell of horrible sausages, hissing

and frying in loathsome butter, and the hoarse un-sexed voice of some face-begrimed and vixen-like woman vaunting her merchandise in tones that seemed to say, "eat or die!"

Charlatans, worthy of Lablache in *Dulcamara*, (and they are really the most amusing part of the *fête*) poured forth speeches from their cars, at which, if near enough to hear, the more intelligent portion of the public must be provoked to genuine hilarity; but which, in the mass, inspire but stupid, brutish, wonderment. On one side, the cracking noise of falling plaster images, knocked down by the skill of some penny marksman; on the other, the incessant dull rolling of a small rounded marble, on which the incipient gamester gazes with nervous anxiety, though the prize, if attained, be only some treacly macaroons. Dust, din, drunkenness and disorder, these where the principal characters of the *fête*.

Lady Augusta and her companion, a raw English youth, a relation of her own, just come from college, and incessantly enquiring where "the fun" was to be found, resolutely explored

every part of the Champs Elysées, followed by Mildred and Mr. Danvers. They had conscientiously studied the different popular attractions, when their attention was arrested by a really beautiful child, a little girl, of about eight or ten years of age, who was performing extraordinary feats of agility upon a carpet spread on the ground.

Lady Vernon made some comparison touching Goëthe's Mignon, and, as a contrast to the swarthy beauty and spangled raggedness of the poor little conjuress, directed her companions' looks towards a young lady near them, who leaned on the arm of a young man, standing close to Mr. Danvers's elbow, in the circle that had formed. She might have been perhaps seventeen, or eighteen at most, and a more perfect type of the kind of delicate flower that loves to expand upon an aristocratic stem, it was barely possible to conceive.

"Who will believe," said Lady Vernon, looking at her, "that that fair, elegant girl, and the Moorish, Murillo-like creature before

us, can belong to the same order of beings? Race, certainly, is not a fiction; there *is* an innate distinction nothing but purity of blood can give."

"Who knows," rejoined Mr. Danvers, with a smile, "but that that young lady may be the daughter of some tea-dealer, or, like King Murat, the lineal descendant of some road-side inn-keeper?"

"It may be," answered Lady Vernon, incredulously; "but I do not think it *is* so."

At this moment the rush from the crowd behind was so tremendous as to push all those in the front row of the circle almost upon the little mountebank and her carpet; cries of distress were heard; every one instinctively turned round, and the very sufficient cause for alarm became visible. Behind many of the booths were tied together, and secured to posts planted in the ground, the horses belonging to the strolling-shopkeepers and *restaurateurs*. It appeared that some demon of mischief, in the shape of a *gamin de Paris*, had amused

himself by fixing pins in the end of a cane, and, when he had well heated these at the fire kindled for culinary purposes, sticking them into the shoulders, haunches, and nostrils of the poor beasts of burthen around. Of these, one, to whom he had, as it seemed, applied the torture too frequently, had, with the yells of agony a horse *can* give, violently broken loose, and was now dashing through the ranks of the populace, kicking, plunging, biting and trampling down all those who attempted to stay him in his course.

The rush of the crowd to the spot where Mildred stood, was accompanied, as we have said, by shrieks and cries of distress and fear,—and followed, lightning-like, by the cause of the alarm. The crowd divided, panic-struck, to give passage to the infuriated beast; but, at the very moment,—she never could describe later how it happened,—Mildred saw the fair young girl she had pointed out to Mr. Danvers, thrown down by the mob, and literally under the raised hoof of the animal! It was the affair of a second—

less !—and no one knew how it was done, but Lady Vernon had sprung forward, and the young stranger, instead of being trampled upon by the maddened brute, or the flying crowd, lay cowering in the folds of her dress, while Mildred dragged her, hardly aware of what she did, to the distance of several yards from the spot where they had stood.

Mr. Danvers was with them, and aided the young lady to rise, and the latter, notwithstanding the risk she had run, showed considerable calmness, and thanked her preserver over and over again, but without flurry or agitation. The crowd had rushed in upon them with such force after the passage of the animal, which was not secured till it had crossed the Allée de Marigny, that Lady Augusta and her companion had disappeared, and Mr. Danvers and Mildred found themselves alone with the rescued incognita. In a few moments, however, they were joined by the young man Lady Vernon had previously remarked, and who turned out to be the young lady's brother.

"Where is my mother?" was her first question.

The young man laughed. "Safe enough," he replied, "so do not be alarmed for her;—but she persisted in it she had seen you carried away in the opposite direction, so in the opposite direction she is gone, whilst I came off upon this side. Whichever recovered you first, was to wait for the other where we have left the carriage, at the *Place Louis Quinze*. So, if you please, thither we will bend our steps;" and, expressing his thanks to Lady Vernon and Mr. Danvers, in the most polite way imaginable, he drew his sister's arm in his, and proceeded in the direction he had named.

As Mildred was returning home through the Tuileries with her party (Lady Augusta and her cavalier having at last rejoined the rest) they were accosted by a lovely little boy, who ran fearlessly up to Lady Vernon, and, taking her hand in his, cried:—

"Oh! *do* come and see papa!—There he is!

he has taken us to the fête! Oh! do come and see papa!"

Mildred looked round, and perceived, under the chestnut trees of the alley leading from the Place de la Concorde to the palace, a gentleman, who, holding a little girl by the hand, was coming, hat in hand, towards her. She immediately recognised the Marquis de Boislambert. Recollecting Lady Augusta's former remark, and yet, having her own private reasons for wishing to lose no occasion of talking with the General, she took a bold determination at once, and, disengaging herself from Mr. Danvers's arm,

"Walk on," said she, smiling. "If I do not join you in the gardens, I shall have an ample escort across the street to your door, and will follow you in a quarter of an hour at most;" and, as she turned to acknowledge M. de Boislambert's greeting, Mr. Danvers heard the latter apologize for the liberty his son had taken in interrupting her walk.

Since the General's return to Paris, Lady

Vernon had seen a great deal of him, both at Madame de Montévreux's and at Madame de Sestrières' with whom she had become intimate; and, for reasons she had divulged to no one, she sought every opportunity of conversing with him, and of diving into his inmost thoughts. Her feminine instinct, aided by the profound passion which, hidden in her own heart, revealed to her all the more delicate secrets of passion in another, had led her to suspect that the General was less indifferent to the sullied memory of his lost wife than he wished the world to believe; and Mildred was too sincerely attached to the Marquise not to desire ardently to unravel this mystery.

She was therefore resolved, on no account to lose the opportunity of talking with M. de Boislambert, *alone*; and as his age, his dignified appearance, and his position, surrounded by his children and their attendants, seemed to warrant more than sufficiently such a mark of familiarity, she had no hesitation in quitting Mr. Danvers, above all, so close to his and her

habitation, and taking a seat on the bench occupied by the General, under pretence of yielding to the entreaties of his little boy, who would not let go his hold upon her hand.

They were both of them at first so engrossed with observing the children, and communicating their remarks upon the growth, health, appearance and aptitudes of the little creatures, that Lady Vernon had not time to remark that, immediately behind them were seated two persons engaged in close conversation. These two near neighbours were completely hidden from her by the trunk of the colossal tree which intervened between them; and the only perceivable thing on Mildred's side, was the toe of a varnished boot, and the end of a very slight, elegant cane that was occasionally tapping it. She could not, however, recover from the surprise caused her by the visible alteration in M. de Boislambert's manner towards his children. Here, he was evidently vanquished, and all the father had awoke....

"I am afraid Marie will be very beautiful,"

said Mildred, smiling; "some ten or twelve years hence she will give you enough to think of, General, besides Marshal Bugeaud and the Kabyles."

The General did *not* smile as he answered, "We sons of the camp have a strong belief in fatality, and are much inclined to think that that which must be, *must* be. Beauty, the rarest, often escapes, when plainness even fails to be a defence—and so, with sentiments, conscience, principles, piety even;—it is *the moment*—the chance, the will of the hour—destiny, in short.—" He stopped as though he had inadvertently said too much.

It was remarkable that with Lady Vernon, the Marquis had an almost total absence of the reserve he affected with every one else. Whether it was that he guessed in her a strength of *naïve* convictions that precluded all notion of ridicule in any case attaching itself to the manifestation of a profound and sincere feeling,—or whether he was drawn towards her by an irresistible and instinctive sympathy for

her own sufferings—I know not, but the fact of his approaching, with her, nearer to an unaffected avowal of his real state of mind in regard to his wife, was certain. The consequence was, the constant recurrence, in conversation, of hints and allusions to which Mildred, perhaps alone out of all the General's habitual society, attached in her own mind a significant sense.

Replying to his observation upon fatality. "It is a creed," said she, "which I can never find in my heart to dispute; for it leads so inevitably to indulgence; but, unless fully prepared to compassionate the weakness which you confess to thinking involuntary, I should not understand it. It is a dilemma out of which I see but one way: he who believes in fatality must practice forgiveness."

"Many things are said, Lady Vernon," replied the General, "the extreme consequences of which, those who say them are not prepared to adopt. There *are* cases in which one *must* believe in inborn evil—in conscious, voluntary,

guilt," (as he said this, their eyes met, and both, simultaneously, adverted in thought to Madame de Cévèzes) ;—" but there are others, in which all that is not divinely pure, appears so unnatural, so monstrous, that the only explanation of a fault must be sought in the doctrine of fatality ; and, in such cases . . . ."

" Surely, forgiveness is a duty," interposed Mildred.

The General sighed deeply.

" You know not," he rejoined evasively : " how many faults are committed by a wrong appreciation of that word ;—how many have fallen, from a false desire to retrieve what they supposed to be a mortal injury ;—and who, whilst vainly attempting to atone, on the one hand, have, on the other, plunged into sin a thousand times worse. If duty could be reduced in the world, to what we have made it in the army, to discipline, things would become easy, and one's line of conduct undeviatingly straight ; but society is there with its thousand fictions, and the human heart with its countless weaknesses."

At this moment Octave ran up to his father to lay that imperious hold on his attention which makes children so insupportable when they are not objects of personal interest. Lady Vernon seized the boy playfully by the arm ; drawing him towards her, and taking his rosy chin in her hand she held his upturned face to her lips and kissed him affectionately.

" Look at those eyes of his, General," said she, " there is an example for your creed. If ever he does any wrong in this world, one glance at them will be sufficient to criminate fate, and prove that inherent evil never harboured there. How innocent they are in their sweet intelligence ! How one feels that truth and honesty look through them !"

Lady Vernon well knew what she was about, and had not uttered one word without reflection. The boy was the living image of his unhappy mother, and had, above all, her remarkable eyes — those dark-brown, lustrous orbs, soft and tender as a fawn's, honest and truthful as a greyhound's. The General grew positively pale as he gazed upon the child.

"Truth and honesty!" he repeated in a low tone, echoing Mildred's words. "Yes! I thought so once, indeed!"

"And think so still, General;" she added gently, and, with a final kiss, sending back the boy to his playmate.

What *he* had said *could* not apply to the child, but to the mother alone, whose glance had thus suddenly shone upon him through that of her infant son. What Mildred had answered *might* have related to either; but each felt now so well that the other's intention was understood, that both remained silent.

Whilst thus apparently engaged in vacantly watching the games of the two children and their attendants, they suddenly became the involuntary listeners to a conversation that sprang up between their hidden neighbours on the other side of the tree, and some one who, at that instant, joined them.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the new comer —"you, here! and *you?* Why, I should as soon have dreamed of seeing Her Majesty,

Queen Maria-Theresa * in person, in the Tuileries on such a day, as my fair ward! In the name of, I *won't* say *Saint Philippe*, how came you here on *his* fête day?—and alone too? Where is the Princess?"

"Oh! it is a long history," replied timidly a young and harmonious female voice, which, to Lady Vernon's ears, seemed not entirely unknown—"he will tell you."

"Well then," resumed another masculine accent: "you must know, *cher tuteur*, that your humble servant, the heir-apparent, *que voici*, had prevailed upon *Madame Mère* to permit that, under the cover of the maternal wings, an expedition should be made to the vulgar regions of the Champs Elysées, upon this auspicious day, in which France, etcetera, etcetera."

And the speaker then proceeded to recount, in all its details, the scene in which Mildred had been a principal actress. She listened to the recital, wherein she was described in terms

* The very ultra-Carlistes never fail of thus styling the Duchesse d'Angoulême.

sufficient to gratify any share of vanity she might have possessed, with a certain degree of interest; and when this subject was exhausted,

"But what brought you *here*?" recommenced the person who had entitled himself the young lady's guardian.

"When we had regained the carriage," replied the other, "we got tired, at the end of half an hour, of waiting for my mother, who, I suppose, is still searching for us: the heat was scorching, and I proposed that we should walk on, and shelter ourselves beneath the trees. I have told Guérin exactly where we should be, and he will come to fetch us, the moment my mother returns."

"Well!" rejoined the graver of the two masculine voices, "it is, in truth, a pretty business! This is what comes of frequenting the haunts of the lower classes—of mixing with the people!"

"And pray, *mon cher Marquis*," retorted the other gaily, "where may you have been all this time?"

"I have no girl of eighteen on my arm," was the reply. "But, *étourdi* as you are, have you had any time to think of our affairs? How are they going on?"

This was said in lower and more serious accents, and the tone of the answer it elicited was correspondingly grave.

"*Etourdi* as I may be, sometimes, Marquis, I am, I assure you, anything but that where such interests as ours are at stake. Our affair is going on magnificently."

"Are you sure?"

"Certain! I saw yesterday—" but here the voice sunk so low, and the words uttered were so whispered, that none reached Lady Vernon's ears. The rejoinder, however, was in the ordinary key.

"If that be the case," said the person called the Marquis, "it is splendid! What a fortune! why her *dot* will be trebled!"

"If not quadrupled, Marquis."

"But if the authorization—" objected the Marquis.

"Ah! bah!" interrupted the younger voice, impatiently. "I tell you it is impossible," and again they whispered.

"But if so," suggested the Marquis, "it would be advisable to buy."

"And do you think I have waited?" retorted the other. "I yesterday bought up all I could find. The premium is enormous; but as the affair must be settled on the 6th, why, that is of no consequence. Therefore, I would advise you to invest quickly the utmost you can dispose of; for, when it once gets wind, the price will be raised to such a height, by the speculators and the Jew capitalists, that it will no longer be productive of more than a moderate gain."

"I will tell Marell to buy to-morrow what is necessary," said the Marquis; "and it shall go hard but the *trousseau* of my charming *pupille*, shall equal, if not efface, that of many a sovereign princess; but I perceive Guérin looking for you under every tree."

And, at these words, it was evident the little group prepared to move.

Lady Vernon had risen a moment before,

and, making a sign to the children, had begged of the General to escort her as far as the Rue de Rivoli. M. de Boislambert, holding his daughter by the hand, and followed at the distance of a few paces by a footman in livery carrying his little boy, and by the little girl's neatly-attired *bonne*, was preparing to accompany Mildred, who had lived long enough in Paris not to take any one's arm, when the party whose conversation they had overheard, emerged from the shadow of the chestnut trees, and passed them, going the contrary way. The young lady, leaning now upon the arm of her guardian, had passed unrecognised, as also her companion; but her brother, who lagged a little behind, gave a smiling bow to the General, who duly acknowledged it.

"*Peste!*" he exclaimed. "So that, then, was the future Duchesse de Montévreux! If I could have guessed it, I should assuredly have felt somewhat more curious."

Luckily for Mildred, who felt herself ready to faint, M. de Boislambert turned round to cast a glance upon the elegant receding

figure of Mademoiselle Olympe de la Roche Bermont.

"I should like to know," he resumed, "what clever plan her wise brother, Master Raoul, has, for increasing his sister's fortune; he is the greatest mad-cap in existence, and his companion, old Renneville, her guardian, is a consummate ass. I never could comprehend how the Prince de la Roche Bermont—silly as he certainly was—could have left such a man guardian to his daughter."

Lady Vernon was resolved to bear up against her suffering, and not permit her companion to perceive the effect his words had made upon her.

"She is very rich, is she not?" asked she.

"She has something like a *dot* of two millions," replied the General; "and that with beauty and accomplishments which, according to all accounts, might stand in stead of any fortune at all. Gaston is a lucky fellow!"

"She is certainly very beautiful," added Lady Vernon.

"I never could exactly understand why the marriage was postponed," pursued M. de Boislambert; "for when the Princess was pouring forth fire and fury at Montévreux's change of politics, the young lady herself gave her decided opinion that *that* made no difference to her, and that she would marry no one but her cousin Gaston. I rather fancy that Madame de Montévreux begged for a year's delay; (for the marriage was to have taken place last summer,) but I have no idea for what reason—have you heard anything about it?"

The word "*nothing*" fell from Mildred's ice-cold lips; but it almost choked her as it was syllabled by her faultering tongue.

"Dear Lady Vernon," said M. de Boislambert, kindly, as, on the threshold of her door, Mildred turned to bid him good bye; "you are not well—you are as pale as death—this heat has been too much for you."

"Yes," replied she, with a sickly smile. "It is that; I should make but a bad soldier, if exposed to all you were telling us the other night, of the Algerian sun."

CHAPTER VI.

The conversation which had taken place between Mildred and M. de Boislambert, and that overheard by them in the Tuileries, produced, in each, different consequences and effects; but, for the moment, we must explain the exact position of each of the parties concerned.

Our reader will, perhaps, recollect that, when at Montmorency, Lady Vernon first heard from Madame de Moreton and the Duchess, the announcement of Gaston's future marriage with his cousin, the event was spoken of as destined to take place in the ensuing year. M. de Montévreux, naturally enough, never broached the subject, because he had secretly

resolved *not* to marry his cousin; and his mother carefully abstained from all allusion to it, because, like a clever and a kind person, as she was, she had determined to "bide her time," and, if possible, avoid hurting any one.

When Gaston expressed a wish to go to England, the Duchess required no explanation to be given to her of the motives of the journey. She saw, without one moment's hesitation, what it meant, and, instead of opposing her son, judged it wisest to meet, on the contrary, his wishes half way.

"You will probably stay much longer than you anticipate," had she said to Gaston, when he first spoke of his departure; "there is so much to see—to study! You will scarcely be back before the end of the carnival, and, since you cannot be married during Lent, it will be better that the Princess and I should, together, postpone Olympe's leaving the convent for a year. She is so very young! it will be all the better."

If the Duchess needed any confirmation of

her suspicions touching the state of her son's affections, she would have found it amply in the effusion of his gratitude at these words. She clearly saw she had relieved him of a burthen that was oppressing him beyond endurance. He went, and we know how, and for what purpose he returned. When the Duchess had opposed to her son's political convictions all her store of argument, (and it was small enough, for she instinctively felt he was *not* doing wrong,) she resigned herself to his achieving honourable fame in the support of opinions that were not her own.

But not so Madame de la Roche Bermont; her fury knew no bounds, and she would undoubtedly have threatened to break off the match with violence, had not something told her that Gaston would, at the slightest indication, have taken her at her word. She therefore contented herself with railing at the English nation upon every possible occasion, and, in her heart, devoting Lady Vernon to the eternal vengeance of the gods. Neither she, nor any

one, save the Duchess, suspected Gaston's attachment to Mildred; but the Princess was jealous of, and annoyed, at the *influence* which she could not but perceive Lady Vernon exercised over her nephew's mind.

In one sense, Madame de Montévreux was perfectly at ease, for she knew Mildred thoroughly, and admired and pitied her from her very soul; but she was aware that considerable delicacy must be used in unravelling the knot that had been formed. She looked upon the affection which united her son and Lady Vernon, as one of those things which, however pure and beautiful in themselves, carry within them the seeds of death, and the more so, that they *are* both beautiful and pure. All the Duchess wanted was to gain time; for she knew that the force of events must come to her aid.

When the year agreed upon was out, Mademoiselle de la Roche Bermont left the Sacré Cœur, and still persisted in her declaration that, whatever might be the political opinions

of her cousin, she had been taught to look upon him as her intended husband, and him only would she wed. The Duchess, after narrowly studying the character of her niece, was astonished at the mixture of gentleness and decision it presented, and resolved to venture upon a step which, with any other French girl of her age, would have been too perilous to attempt.

She begged of her to favour any delays that might occur in regard to her marriage with her cousin, on the pretext that Gaston would naturally wish, after having so newly adhered to the existing government, to give some further pledge of his sincerity before openly uniting himself with the scion of a house whose very name was a watch-word for the bitterest enemies of the Orleans dynasty.

The sensible and ingenuous girl entered completely into the Duchess's views, and obtained the consent of her family to the postponement of her marriage until after the

close of the session. This settled, Madame de Montévreux clearly saw that she *must* soon come to an understanding with her son. But the affair was difficult and delicate to a degree, and she could not avoid anticipating it with dread.

Gaston, on his side, dared not openly break off his engagement with his cousin, for fear of compromising Mildred. He was aware that a step so decidedly taken could not fail to attract interested and ill-natured eyes towards its cause; and then, who would believe in the angel purity, in the vestal innocence of his beloved? Of her for whom he would be making a sacrifice which the world could not comprehend.

At the same time, his upright nature revolted from the want of candour, from the tacit deceit he was practising upon Mademoiselle de La Roche Bermont. He was troubled and perplexed beyond measure, and knew not which way to turn, or what to do; he would have given the world to be able to escape from this false

position by an overt *act*, no matter how painful: but he was bound hand and foot, and dared not move. In the end, he saw that it must come to an *éclat;* but what would be the consequences? He feared them, not for his cousin,—for with her name, and her considerable *dot*, she was certain, when known to be free, to secure, within a few weeks, a *parti* to the full as advantageous as himself; but Mildred? what would become of her?—pure, yet wronged as she could not then fail to be,—innocent and pursued by calumny which would inevitably overtake her, would she find in his devotion the compensation for what she must lose? Could Lady Vernon live unhonoured by the world and supported solely by his love, and the approbation of her own conscience? Gaston doubted; and another question arose. In such a case, *would* Lady Vernon's conscience approve? And to this, Gaston's internal monitor steadily replied—No! Here then, he foresaw, in the distance, the loss of all he loved rendered inevitable by his own act,

and, like the generality of human creatures, inspired by human passions, he turned away from the picture, and resolved for the present to do nothing, and await the decrees of destiny.

The position of Mademoiselle de La Roche Bermont was certainly as brilliant as Gaston could have wished. When her father died, he had left the Marquis de Renneville sole guardian to his two children, Raoul and Olympe. Four or five millions had been divided between them, and M. de Renneville had, three years before, put upwards of two out of these into the hands of the young Prince upon his coming of age. As in France, people are always inclined to think that no one does any thing without a selfish interest, Gaston de Montévreux was generally supposed to have done "*a good thing*" for himself, in securing, as his wife, his beautiful and wealthy cousin.

In truth, M. de Montévreux had had but little part in the arrangement, beyond giving his consent when it was asked from him by the two mothers ; and, before Mildred had taught

him how sacred a thing is a really profound and pure affection, he had looked upon this union as affording about as many chances of future happiness, as any other that could be planned.

Raoul de La Roche Bermont, after spending, —with the deduction of a few weeks passed from time to time in Paris,—three years abroad (principally in Germany and Spain) had returned at four and twenty to his own country, full of pretensions and ambitious desires, which had all poured themselves forth into wrong channels. He wanted the courage and patriotism to follow Gaston's example; besides he was yet too young to aspire to parliamentary honours; but he had the disastrous determination "*to do something*," without knowing clearly how or what. He was tired of inactivity, possessed a certain degree of mischievous cleverness, and an absolute itching for movement, no matter of what kind or sort. He was not satisfied with his splendid fortune, but dreamt of the gold of the Rothschilds, and thought incessantly of the vast sums gained

by "lucky hits" and fortunate speculations. Undecided to throw himself frankly into the political world, he did, what so many of his caste have done in France—he plunged into the infamous intricacies of the World of Finance.

Unfortunately he had words and specious arguments enough at command, not to stand alone in his schemes; and he was not long without having drawn M. de Renneville into all his plans and projects. The latter, thinking for ever of how he could best increase the fortune of his ward, and, at sixty-eight, somewhat less of a man of business, and decidedly a greater stranger to passing events, than Raoul at twenty-four, readily looked upon the young de La Roche Bermont as an incipient Turgot, a Colbert in embryo. Raoul was what the French call a *faiseur*, the most deplorable of all characters, and what, in an inferior rank of life, leads directly to intrigue, if not to something even worse.

He could not be quiet;—his brain was

always plotting, contriving, combining; and he had a kind of abhorrencc of any thing done in a plain straight-forward way. Unfortunately, too, the Princesse was impressed with the most exalted idea of her son's capabilities, so that she never dreamed of even enquiring into what he and M. de Renneville were concerting together. The Marquis's guardianship, as instituted by her late husband's will, was absolute, and the state in which he had given up his fortune to Raoul, upon his coming of age, showed sufficiently how well he was to be trusted.

Nothing was thought of that winter but railway concessions. "*Have you any Great Northern?*" was the question with which men met their friends on the Boulevards, and the attractions of the most melo-dramatic *feuilletons* were eclipsed by those of the *Journal des Chemins de Fer*.

The Princesse de La Roche Bermont and her daughter had both of them some faint idea that M. de Renneville and the Prince were very deep in railroad projects, but the former had too

implicit a confidence in the financial genius of her son, and the latter, too utter a disregard for every thing connected with mere wealth, to attempt to penetrate farther into the intentions of these two wise schemers. They had heard some talk of the great line from Paris to Frankfort, but just as they had heard of the line from Paris to Strasbourg, or from Lyons to Marseilles, and without attaching thereto any further importance.

Madame de La Roche Bermont and Raoul were not without their ideas, that Gaston had looked complacently on Olympe's magnificent *dot*; and the former regretted hourly that such a fortune and such a name should be allied to a man who, false to every tradition of his family, had tendered his allegiance to the Revolution of July.

Madame de Montévreux could not avoid confessing to Mildred that she had been considerably hurt by Gaston's change in politics, and did not disguise to her, to whose influence she thought the change must be ascribed. This,

Mildred did not deny,—but she defended her convictions so earnestly, the Duchess saw that, whatever part she might have persuaded Gaston to take, came so entirely from her sincere wish for his welfare, that she forgave her, and they remained just as great friends as heretofore.

But poor Lady Vernon had now to learn what were the fresh tortures in store for her. She had, since the previous day (the day of her interview with M. de Montévreux in the garden at Montmorency) felt that a sacrifice was now imposed upon her; and, to say the least, the serenity of her affection was disturbed. There is no saying whether, had this feeling been allowed to increase, it might not have gradually produced that species of soreness and susceptibility which so rarely fails to spring up in *liaisons* of this kind, even the most pure and innocent, and which, nine times out of ten ultimately provokes the undignified rupture of an un-sanctified bond;—but jealousy now stepped in; and in the exquisite horrors of that sentiment, every budding regret at the fancied

loss of independence, and the more certain loss of self-esteem, was for ever effaced.

When Mildred left her home on that memorable first of May, she was at war with herself; and her better, nobler self, was not upon Gaston's side—when she returned to her home, all internal strife was at an end; and every energy, every instinct, every faculty of her heart and mind, had united in one overwhelming fear of losing him she loved.

Lady Vernon had promised to dine with the Danvers's. She was sitting in her drawing-room, on the first seat she had found—her bonnet lying beside her on the floor, but her shawl still round her shoulders, and one glove still upon her hand. A ring was heard at the bell, and the Duc de Montévreux entered.

"I tried by every means to rejoin you in the Champs Elysées," said Gaston, the first greetings over; "and could not succeed. Where were you in Heaven's name?"

"If you had come at the hour Lady Augusta appointed for us all to meet, last night,

you would have had no need of trying to rejoin us, for we should then all have gone together," replied Lady Vernon, with something like a little shade of bitterness.

Gaston took her hand, and pressed it to his lips.

"Mildred," he replied in a tone of gentle reproach. "Do you think if I *could* have come, I should have omitted to do so? It is unkind, and ungenerous to say these things to me, for you are the cause that often my time is not my own."

"How so?"

"Because, in the career into which you have thrown me, one's duty to one's country can only be discharged conscientiously at the cost of a constant sacrifice of one's pleasures: and this morning, I was forced to consecrate between four and five hours to the study of a question, the papers appertaining to which I ought to have received last night."

"What was it?" rejoined Lady Vernon, as though it could have any interest for her. The Duke smiled.

"Nay Mildred," he answered; "this is being too much of a politician; but however I will satisfy you. It is the question of the great international line of railroad from Paris to Frankfort—a direct concession is asked for, and will, I fear, be obtained."

"And why do you fear?" asked Lady Vernon, glad to speak upon any subject which should divert her mind from the one to which it was too ready to revert.

"Because I think it would be disastrous that the State should lose the profits of so vast an enterprize—but do not," he continued, "do not let us be pondering over such vile lore; time enough to talk of such prosaic things as railways when the day of the discussion comes. What do you do this evening? Lady Augusta will of course go to see the fireworks—and, Mildred then,—you can give me your arm: —promise me you will. Do you know," he added tenderly, "I quite love these *fêtes*; for one is so lost in them,—so isolated, so solitary with what one loves, in the noisy rushing

torrent of human beings around, that with you on my arm, in the crowd, I forget every thing, and fancy fate has thrown our destinies together, and that we are some obscure and happy couple, for whom, on their return, are waiting all the joys of a tranquil home, rich only in the treasures of their love."

This was too much; Lady Vernon turned away her head.

"Mildred!" exclaimed Gaston. "Forgive me; but you are weeping. What have I said? what is the matter? for God's, sake tell me!"

"The joys of that happy home; happy notwithstanding its splendour—will be your's, Gaston," she faltered; "but not with me."

"What can you mean?" he rejoined, trying vainly to withdraw her hands from her face. "Mildred, what *is* the matter?"

The name of Mademoiselle de la Roche Bermont came almost inaudibly from Lady Vernon's lips, as she strove to repress her convulsive sobs. Gaston caught her to his heart.

"Is that all, beloved of my soul?" cried he, "then let not another tear fall from those dear eyes. Olympe has a fortune that, even were she less charming and amiable, would suffice in these gold-loving days to ensure her any alliance, however splendid; therefore I am doing her no harm in swearing to you, my own Mildred, that Olympe de la Roche Bermont shall never be my wife!" and he imprinted one kiss upon Lady Vernon's fair brow, as he breathed forth this passionate promise.

CHAPTER VII.

From the hour in which Mildred had seen the straight road lying before her, and had turned away, and, out of love for Gaston, had abandoned her determination of following it—she had bade adieu to all internal peace. Till then, she had really believed that she was acting rightly and honourably—that she could do no more than she had done; and, rich in her own approbation and esteem, she had known none of the torturing doubts, fears, and agitations, which, in these attachments, are, to use the apt expression of our neighbours, so *demoralizing* to the individual.

But now, since she was conscious of having

done, for Gaston's sake, what she knew she should not have done, since she had felt that the mere fact of neglecting aught that might be tried for the salvation of him whose name she bore, was a base abandonment of a sacred post, a betrayal of a most holy trust, she could not help regarding herself with feelings far from complacent.

In all these mental tortures which—once again alone, and given up to her reflections—Mildred found herself condemned to endure, she did not revert to the possible loss of reputation. She thought her honour safe, for she was not as yet old enough in the world, and especially in the continental world, to know that fame is not always just, and that the actual existence of virtue, though sometimes fortunate enough to be acknowledged, is not always sufficient to ensure the reputation of it.

M. de Montévreux had declared, it is true, had sworn, that his cousin should remain ever indifferent to him; but no assurance of his could suffice. The gnawing worm that nothing

can arrest was at work; and soon, what had been known only to Mildred and her lover, must become known to the whole world.

Lady Vernon's cheek grew pale, her eye restless, her voice abrupt, her step unsure; her sweet air of calm, of pure, untroubled innocence had flown; and the species of extatic rapture called forth by her enthusiastic attachment for Gaston, which had lent to her whole being an appearance of almost divine inspiration, had vanished for ever. The illusion was gone, and the golden halo of the saint had disappeared in the foggy vapours of the earth.

The day came on which M. de Montévreux was to produce, before his colleagues of the Chamber of Deputies, the result of his hard labours; but as the subject of his speech was an uninteresting one, and one, the merits of which it was not probable any woman would appreciate, Lady Vernon did not attend the sitting. What could a discussion on railroads matter to her? Of what possible importance could it be to her whether the Cronstadt and Laberrière

Company obtained the direct concession of the great line from Paris to Frankfort, as was anticipated, or whether the advantages of it devolved upon the State?

The evening of the day upon which this important financial question was to occupy the *Chambre des Députés*, had been chosen by their majesties for their reception of their faithful subjects. Gaston de Montévreux was to meet Lady Augusta Danvers, and her party, at the Tuileries in the long gallery, at the end leading into the *Salle des Maréchaux*, as nearly after eight o'clock as it should be possible.

The interior of the palace blazed with light; the long suite of apartments was thronged with the glittering crowd; and the greater portion of the principal celebrities of France was waiting for a gracious word, or look of recognition from the sovereign, whilst strangers of renown from every nation on the earth were anxious to pay homage to the monarch in whose hands Providence had placed the most august respon-

sibility perhaps ever yet conferred upon mortal man.

Towards half past eight, a general hush stilled the gallery on the left hand side, and the words *le Roi*—guessed even more than heard—opened a passage for the royal party between the fair occupants of the benches ranged against the walls, and the crowd of men stationed in the middle of the gallery.

The King came first, heralded by a brilliant staff—erect and untouched by age, bearing his years, as honours, lightly; gracious in manner, ready in words; of whatever nation might be those the aid-de-camp presented, the sovereign addressed them in their own idiom; and left them, if not under a decidedly pleasurable impression (there is in the countenance of Louis Philippe a Satanic slyness which forbids that), under one of at least very decided surprise.

After the passage of the royal family, the crowd rushed in from all sides; each sought the one he wished to meet, and conversations

sprang up on every side. But Mildred was not long in remarking that one topic seemed to engross almost every one's attention. However great the crowd, this is a thing sooner ascertained than people imagine. It is astonishing how quickly a general pre-occupation transpires; —how you trace it in the words that you but imperfectly hear, how every half-phrase borne by, on the rush of the human torrent around, reverts and returns to the same unvarying subject.

"It is a triumph great as unexpected," said some one on the right.

"What a dreadful thing!" said some one else on the left.

"They will be ruined!" uttered a voice from behind.

"Magnificent for the country," observed another from before.

"Oh! my dear fellow, you never saw a vote so carried off!"

"But was it a long speech? I have not seen the *Moniteur*."

"So young too, and so handsome!"

"Well, this time yesterday no one expected this."

These were a few of the unconnected remarks Lady Vernon heard on all sides, and instinctively associated, she knew not why, with the idea of Gaston. The evidence, however, of some great event having occurred, reached even the, on all foreign political topics, well defended comprehension of Lady Augusta. She wanted to know whether the ministry was in or out, and had vague dreams of M. de Sebastiani, whom she had known in England, being made Minister for Foreign Affairs; besides which, she was anxious about the fate of the ladies of the royal household, and could not be brought to believe that no ministerial changes affected them.

At length, Lady Vernon perceived, at a few paces distance, General de Boislambert coming towards her. She at first hesitated as to what she should do, being on Lady Augusta's arm; but when she had well surveyed the number of decorations heaped upon the General's splendid

uniform, and taken into consideration his late victories in Algeria (about which Lady Augusta was sure to know nothing), and his rank of *Marquis* (which was certain to produce upon her the very best possible effect) she resolved upon introducing M. de Boislambert to her friend. Before either of the ladies could question him,

"Well," he exclaimed, "this is a pretty achievement of our friend Montévreux!"

"What is it?" faintly demanded Mildred.

"What is it?" asked in the same breath eagerly Lady Augusta, always powerfully interested about people whom "everybody" knew.

"It is," he replied, "that he has, by his speech of to-day, provoked a vote which no one could have ventured to anticipate."

"Was it not on some railroad question?" said Lady Vernon, as though she were half sorry it were not in some more brilliant field that the Duke had borne off his victory.

"Railroad question!" echoed the General,

with a smile. "Yes indeed, it *was* on a railroad question. This line from Paris to Frankfort, the greatest, the most important line of railroad yet projected, had become the pet scheme of the company formed under the best possible auspices—the company Cronstadt and Laberrière. They besought of the chambers the authorization for a direct concession to them of this line; and, till three hours ago, every soul believed they would have got it. More than half the chamber was with them. The affair seemed so certain, that if I had not laid down for myself as an invariable opinion that no one belonging to the army, navy, or, in short, to any public function, ought to dabble in such matters, I declare to you, I should myself have bought two thousand actions at the Bourse, yesterday, at four hundred francs premium (by which I should have lost one-third of my fortune at a blow.) I say this to show you how morally sure the affair appeared.

"When Gaston de Montévreux got up to

speak against the Direct Concession, I do not believe that fifty deputies in the Chamber paid any attention to what he was saying, much less agreed in his view of the matter; but, before he had spoken for ten minutes, the whole assembly was literally hanging on every word that came out of his mouth. He insisted so earnestly on the danger of allowing such great public works to be monopolized by a few financial families, enumerated so clearly the enormous profits and advantages the State was thus voluntarily alienating from itself, and fought so manfully against the tendency to create an aristocracy of gold, to put the country in the power of a handful of Jew potentates,—that the Chamber rose to a man at the end of his speech, and voted immediately against the Direct Concession. I have seen many parliamentary successes since 1830, but I confess to have seen few like that."

"But if, as I think you said, M. le Marquis," interposed Mr. Danvers, who had joined the

group, "promises of shares were yesterday at four hundred francs premium, many people must be ruined."

"Ah!" replied M. de Boislambert, "that is the reverse of the medal; a too considerable number, I am afraid, will have paid the price of what can hardly be called an imprudence, when I tell you that I, who do not consider myself an *étourdi*, should have thought myself sure of colossal benefits in buying yesterday at that rate, and that it assuredly was not the fancied uncertainty of the speculation that deterred me from so doing, but a totally different sentiment; but hush!" continued the Marquis; "here is Montévreux close behind you, and there is no knowing how he may like to hear his victory alluded to."

Gaston advanced towards the group, and there is no saying what turn the conversation might have taken, if Colonel Mowbray had not at that moment come to join them, and, after respectfully greeting the two ladies, (Lady

Augusta was an old acquaintance of his), forced it back into the channel M. de Boislambert had just stopped.

"I congratulate you, *mon cher* Gaston," he ejaculated—(the Colonel called every man, of no matter what rank, by his Christian name.) "You are a hero, and ought to be illuminated like a public edifice on the 29th of July; but I would not advise you to go home without an escort to-night, for your victims are innumerable. The whole world is turned topsy-turvy. The Cronstadts lose countless millions—that is of no consequence; but only think of poor d'Offémont, who loses five millions, and Guernier, who is totally ruined, and the Marquis de Fontrailles (Adrien's brother), and the Duc de Mazières, and old Lebrun, and Heaven knows who else besides—all ruined, done up, cleaned out!"

M. de Montévreux had turned pale, and was visibly pained. "Will you accept my arm, Lady Vernon?" he said, as he saw the Colonel

turn round to reply to some question of Lady Augusta's.

They proceeded in silence to the throne-room, which was now nearly empty; and, stationing themselves in one of the embrasures of the deep-set windows opening on the Place du Carrousel, seemed to be only occupied in gazing upon the movement going on in the open square below.

The moon was shining calmly in the deep blue heavens, and the thousand twinkling lamps of the carriages that thronged the court looked as though a shower from the star-lit canopy above had fallen on the earth and spangled the very pavements.

"You are unhappy," said Lady Vernon, timidly, in answer to a deep sigh that had escaped her companion.

"Oh, Mildred!" he replied, "the life to which you have doomed me requires harder nerves than mine."

"But surely," she suggested, "the glory, the fame—"

"There it is!" he rejoined. "I have heard no words save those since I descended from the tribune. I believe, I hope, I did my duty; but I avow to you, Mildred, that I am not Roman enough to be recompensed by *that* feeling, even, for the horrrible consciousness of all the individual misery I have caused. Suppose that, amongst the number of those whom my voice has this day ruined, suppose that there were *one* whose whole heart's happiness depended on his wealth, and to whom gold was but the means of attaining the goal set for him by his affections, what right have I to have dashed the unstable edifice of his felicity to the ground?—to have driven him to madness—to—" he shuddered.

"Oh, Mildred!" he resumed, in a tone of the deepest melancholy, "I was, Heaven knows sincere to-day; but who can dare be so sure of his judgment, of the deductions and conclusions of his miserable mortal intellect, as to take upon himself the awful responsibility of ruining irretrievably *one* single human creature, for the pretended benefit of the mass?"

"And it is *I* with whom you are annoyed for having persuaded you to a career, the glory of which you despise," observed Mildred, despondingly.

"Despise is not the word—I *fear* it—it makes me tremble!" and then, with a faint smile: "*One* thing, however, it *has* done," added he, "it has enabled me to take a step on which I have been long resolved. I suppose," he pursued, in a tone of melancholy, not untinged with irony, "that, in this nation, where success warrants every thing, I may be allowed to make my devotion to my country an excuse for declining all other engagements."

Lady Vernon's heart beat and her eyes glistened—her lover's eyes met hers—they were both so happy at that moment! Poor Mildred! Poor Gaston!

M. de Montévreux, on his return home, barely had time to gain his own room, when his mother entered, holding a letter in her hand. The Duchess's mien and manner were so very grave, that her son was instinctively alarmed.

"Gaston," she began, "I found Pierre had been commissioned by you to carry this letter to my sister-in-law." And the letter which she now laid on the table bore the address of the Princesse de la Roche Bermont. "I arrogated to myself the liberty of taking possession of it." She hesitated.

"Whatever you choose to do, is well done, my dear mother," said the Duke; "but why delay the delivery of that letter?"

"I did not mean to *delay* it, Gaston," said Madame de Montévreux, in a still graver, lower tone. "*That* letter cannot go."

"Forgive me, dear mother," rejoined, firmly, Gaston, "that letter *must* go."

The Duchess rose, and, advancing to the fire-place, against which her son was leaning, "Gaston," she repeated, looking him steadily, but sadly, in the face, "I can but too well guess its contents, I fear, and it *must not* go *now*, for it would seem like an insult to misfortune. Your cousin, Olympe, is penniless, and Raoul irretrievably ruined."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE Duchess was too well acquainted with the thousand little intricacies and susceptibilities of the human heart, to discuss any further with her son at the moment she returned him his letter to the Princess de la Roche Bermont. With his permission, at his request indeed, she again took the letter into her possession, and, imprinting a tender kiss upon Gaston's brow, left him to his own meditations.

Early the next morning, M. de Montévreux entered his mother's apartment. He looked jaded and harassed, and it was evident that he had not closed his eyes the preceding night. The Duchess was employed at some crochet

work close to a small square table, the corner of which protruded between her chair and another, into which Gaston silently sank. Neither uttered a word.

Madame de Montévreux continued her work, and her son fell into a profound reverie. The purse his mother was making recalled to him a thousand by-gone things. It was from Lady Vernon she had taken the precise pattern of the toy, and the crimson and gold threads, as they glided down the silken robe of the Duchess, and formed capricious arabesques on the carpet at her feet, seemed to him to entwine themselves into a kind of mute history of his lost happiness.

He recollected a certain day, when he had found Mildred at an open window of her apartment in the Hotel Bristol, and when she had said to him in her smiling innocence, that Madame de Cévèzes having broken with M. de Moreton, could not be of the slightest consequence to any one but themselves.

Gaston took up one of the gold threads of

the purse his mother was making, and gazed at it with an intense interest, which the object itself certainly did not warrant.

The Duchess felt all that her son was suffering, and resolved to support him by an appearance of more firmness than she really felt.

"Gaston," she began, "I am sure you want to be informed of all the details of this disastrous affair of your cousin's."

The Duke bowed assent.

"Last night your aunt sent for me before I had finished dinner; or rather, I should say, it was a note from Olympe herself that summoned me. When I arrived, you may conceive the shock I received. Raoul was absent since the morning, and had only written a line to his mother, on learning the vote of the chamber, to tell her that her own private fortune was all that remained to them, for that his and his sister's were both swallowed up in the frightful gulf which had, within a few hours, devoured the substance of so many families. What has become of him no one knows as yet. Olympe

supposes that he will have gone away either to the German or Swiss frontier for a time; but he has left all in order as to the payment of these awful sums. Olympe, the admirable creature! lost not a moment in writing to M. de Renneville, to tell him not to delay an hour, but to sell everything he could dispose of, belonging to her, in order to meet the exigencies of the stock-brokers, and to assure him that she felt no anger or ill-will towards him."

"That was nobly done," observed Gaston.

"Nobly!" echoed his mother. "Ah! I wish you could see her! I never witnessed such elevation, such generosity, such abnegation of self! When I arrived, she entreated me to go to M. de Renneville for her, before seeing her mother, and to learn from him the real and precise state of affairs. Her only fear, I clearly saw, was, lest they should find themselves involved beyond what even their considerable resources could pay. But upon that point I had no hesitation in quieting her, by at once making use of your name, and declaring that, to the very

last franc, your fortune and mine should, if necessary, be sacrificed, sooner than allow a stain to settle on the name of your father's nephew."

"Right, my own dear mother—right!" exclaimed Gaston. "The very last franc shall be theirs. Poor Olympe!"

"Luckily," resumed Madame de Montévreux, "there is no necessity for any aid from us. Raoul's and Olympe's fortune cover every thing, and leaves them each somewhere about two hundred Napoleons a year, independently of what they will have at their mother's death, which will be little more than perhaps as much again; for when your father's sister married the Prince de la Roche Bermont, the portion her father could afford to give her was but small. A pretty fortune for Mademoiselle de la Roche Bermont!" continued the Duchess; "four hundred Napoleons a year!"

"Poor, poor Olympe!" repeated again the Duke; "and *I* am the involuntary cause of all this misery!"

"Yes, Gaston," replied his mother; "but do

not fancy that one single reproach has fallen from her lips upon that score. Her mother, indeed, is in a state bordering upon madness, and does nothing but alternately upbraid you as the author of all their misfortunes, and tear her hair at the thoughts of being obliged to leave her beautiful hotel, and give up her magnificent equipages and all the splendours she loves so much; whilst Olympe, on the contrary, at every moment seized my hand, and repeated—'Gaston has done his duty—tell him never to doubt *that* —tell it him from me. We ought all of us to be proud of him. It is not too dear a price to pay with all one's fortune for the honour of having such a citizen in one's family.' The poor child had, it seems, studied the question profoundly, and had persuaded her mother to allow her yesterday to go to the Chamber with your aunt Sestrières. Little did she guess that, when she beheld your triumph, when she gloried in it, she was assisting at the destruction of all her earthly hopes."

Gaston, sincerely touched by this last trait,

shaded his eyes with his hand. His mother continued:

"M. de Renneville, whom, to gratify Olympe, I saw, does nothing but cry like a child, and wail and moan over the fatality which has made him the instrument of ruin and misery to one whom he loved like his own child. I laboured hard to convince him that Olympe would remember nothing but that fact alone, and would never allow the loss of what she calls 'a few paltry thousands' to interfere with her attachment for her father's oldest friend. The poor old man is really inconsolable, and the only comfort he is capable of deriving seems to come from the idea that some of the wisest heads in France have been as much deceived as himself, and that amongst the victims are many whom any one might have been authorized to look upon as models of prudence and intelligence in such matters. Before me, he naturally refrained from speaking of you; but I could perceive that, in his heart, he looks upon you as little less than the executioner of your cousin's

whole family, and that nothing—not even Olympe's future happiness coming from your hand—can reconcile him to your act of yesterday."

"Oh! mother! mother!" sighed M. de Montévreux, "what the whole world calls my *triumph* has made me wretched enough. In pity, do not *you* join with those who have a right to abhor me."

"Gaston," said the Duchess, tenderly, "I join so little with them, that last night, while you were tendering the homage of your respect to the sovereign of your choice, Olympe and I were sitting in the little room where as children you used all of you to play; and, taking advantage of a moment when the Princess had dropped off to sleep, were together reading the *Moniteur*, which she had desired to be brought to her the moment it appeared. *Ungrateful!*" pursued the Duchess; "we were reading your speech; her head rested on my shoulder, and she followed with her eyes what I read aloud, and every now and then she stopped me to correct

some inaccuracy or to explain to me with what tone of voice, with what gestures you accompanied certain expressions. When we had ended, she threw her arms round my neck, and kissing me with the fervent affection of a daughter, 'Tell my cousin,' said she, 'that, whoever may blame him, there is one who will eternally proclaim that he has done his duty; and *that* one is she whom he may falsely fancy he has most injured.' "

"God bless her!" murmured M. de Montévreux, with deep emotion.

"Yes, Gaston," answered the Duchess, almost sternly, "*that* is easy to say; but God *can* only bless her through *you*. You have been the instrument of her misfortune; you *must*, and you alone *can* be that of her felicity."

M. de Montévreux remained silent; but during the last words of his mother's recital he had been occupied in selecting a match from a little cedar box on the Duchess's table, had lighted it, and applied the flame to a wax taper standing by her blotting-book. Slowly he then

took the letter which lay upon the corner of the table between them—his letter to Madame de la Roche Bermont—and applied it to the flame of the taper.

As the Duchess's last peremptory words fell upon her son's ears, he was watching the progress of the fire, as it leisurely eat through the thick satined paper of the envelope, and, blackening, advanced towards the portion held between his finger and thumb.

There remained little more than an inch or two unburnt, and the Duke then, extending his hand, seized the tongs, transferred the remaining morsel of paper to their grasp, and holding them over the hearth, let the last cinder slowly fall, and then leisurely replaced the tongs in their place by the chimney-piece.

Madame de Montévreux followed his every movement with undisguised anxiety.

"You were right, my dear mother," he at length said, in a low but decided tone, when the last fragment of the paper had been consumed. "You were right; *that* letter could

not be sent to its destination; and Heaven be praised that you were enabled to prevent it; but, although at this moment I will do nothing that shall show aught but the most devoted respect to my aunt and her angelic child, I cannot, I *will* not—I *never* will marry Olympe."

"Gaston!" cried the Duchess, in a voice totally unlike her habitually gentle accents, and reddening with anger, as she half rose from her chair, "you will draw down misery and shame —dishonour even, on *others* as much, nay more, than on yourself, if you persist in such an unwarrantable resolution."

"Mother," replied he, looking steadily at Madame de Montévreux, "I entreat of you, if you would have me remain calm, if you would have me remember, as it is fitting I should ever do, the respect I owe to you, mention *no others here*. I, and I *alone*, am engaged in this discussion. My *will* is the sole opposition against which you have to contend, and *that*, I grieve to say, (since it is not in accordance with your wishes) is, upon this point, inflexible."

"But, Gaston," suggested Madame de Montévreux, in a milder tone, "have you considered that you are bound? That honour—"

"Rely upon it," he rejoined gravely, "your son will do nothing that shall be at variance with the laws of honour; but allow me, my dear mother, to be the better judge of what honour really *does* command. I cannot, I repeat it—I *will* not, wed my cousin; and upon *you* must devolve the task of making her acquainted with this irrevocable determination."

"I!" cried the Duchess. "Oh no!—That I should thus dash from her hold the last support on which she so implicitly counted? That I should destroy at one blow her belief in the existence of truth and goodness upon earth? That I—I! should teach her that there is no friendship capable of resisting misfortune; no faith proof against the loss of worldly wealth? No, no, Gaston! I will not be the one to break Olympe's heart, as you have ruined her worldly prospects."

"Your words are harsh," said the Duke,

sadly; "nor do I think I have quite deserved them; but if I proposed to you the task of imparting my resolution to my cousin, it was not for *my* sake, but for *hers*; it was not that I shrink from the declaration, but that I think that declaration may come softened from your lips. The words *must be said*, mother," reiterated Gaston, firmly. "Will you say them?"

Madame de Montévreux leant upon the table, and looked thoughtfully into her son's face. "Gaston," murmured she, "is there *no* way in which—can you devise no means of escaping from this dreadful necessity? Indeed, indeed," she added, earnestly, "you do not reflect on what the world will say!"

"The world!" he echoed, disdainfully.

"Yes," she repeated, "the world. You may now despise its decrees; but a moment would come when its harsh sentence, striking those who are dearer to you than self, would force you to acknowledge its power. Have you thought of how you would feel when your best friends, turning from you, should say, shaking their

heads, 'I am sorry?' Have you for one instant reflected upon the stoicism you will need, to bear up against the unworthy, the ignoble, imputations cast upon you? 'What,' it will be said, 'the Duc de Montévreux would have wedded Mademoiselle de la Roche Bermont rich; but poor—and poor through his fault—he withdraws from his contract!' And it is not a world towards which you are indifferent; they are not strange voices that will say this. Your own friends, Gaston—those you honour, those you love, will be the first to believe it and to lament—"

"But," he interrupted, "what if I myself bestow all my own property upon charitable institutions? What if I dispossess myself of all, but exactly the same modest sum which Raoul's speculations have left his sister?"

Madame de Montévreux shook her head. "Alas!" she replied, "if the imputations of sordidness be wiped from your name, the as yet unblemished renown of *another* will be sullied. Suppose that the world fixes upon a *cause* for

your conduct—a fair, a pure, and (I know it) an *innocent* cause. What, think you, will be the measure, what the limit of the obloquy thrown upon *her* by the very best among them? Can you prevent *that?* Answer me, my son. If, by any miracle, you could save yourself, tell me, *can* you save *her?*"

M. de Montévreux hung down his head, and sighed deeply, but said nothing. The Duchess rose from her seat, and approaching nearer to her son, bent over him tenderly, and took one of his hands in hers; the other supported and shaded his thoughtful brow.

"My own Gaston," continued Madame de Montévreux, "do you know your mother so little, as to think that, were there any possible means of saving you a pang, an annoyance even, she would not have adopted it, before one word should have been breathed to disturb you? But when no way exists save one that inevitably leads to your own dishonour—do not start, it is the appropriate term—must she not then—tell me, my Gaston, is it not then her part to give you

courage, to steel you to the accomplishment of a painful duty?"

M. de Montévreux bore his mother's hands affectionately to his lips, and, rising from his seat, said despondingly,

"My reason tells me you are right; but, alas! are there not moments, are there not circumstances, in which reason cannot, nay, ought not, alone to guide us?"

"You need say no more," interposed the Duchess. "I know—do not be angry with me, for I have, I think, shown a degree of discretion which might have entitled me to your confidence—I know *all* that is passing within you. I know, my son, that this *is* a case in which the heart is concerned—in which the heart alone can advise, in which it alone *ought* to pronounce, and dictate the line of conduct to be observed."

"My dearest mother!" interrupted Gaston, with unfeigned emotion.

"Yes, Gaston," she continued, "and the counsels of the heart are those I offer to you.

You are not frank with me, my son; and yet you might be so; you might be *honourably* so, Gaston, for you have nothing to conceal; each word of yours could but increase the esteem, the admiration I feel for *her*. I *love her*, Gaston, dearly—respect her, honour her—and yet—" the Duchess hesitated—"all I ask of you, my son, is to have confidence in me," she added, in a more decided tone. "Do not fear me—do not distrust me; believe that in the depths of my heart lies one only thought—your welfare."

"Of that I am certain," remarked the Duke.

"I do not mean," resumed his mother, "your '*welfare*,' as the word would be generally understood: I mean your happiness, such as *you*, not *I*, have conceived it—I mean your *idea*—your dream of worldly felicity, whether that accords with mine or not. Will you confide in me, on these terms?"

"I will," answered M. de Montévreux; "but on *one* condition—that the marriage with my cousin be definitively broken off."

"But in my own way?" rejoined the Duchess.

"In any way you choose," he answered; "and, one other prayer yet, my dearest mother—not a word of all this, not a breath to—"

"To Lady Vernon," concluded the Duchess, in a whisper. "I understand you, Gaston; you would not have her know the extent of the sacrifice you are making."

"I would not give her one single instant's pain, that, at the price of my heart's blood, I could avoid," he said, pressing his mother's hand; "and it *would* pain her to know what has happened to my cousin."

"You are right, my son," rejoined Madame de Montévreux. "Such sacrifices as these, when decided upon, must be made, and not talked of."

As Gaston prepared to leave his mother's apartment, he met in the ante-room one of the Duchess' women speaking to a gentleman, in whom he recognised the Marquis de Boislambert.

Holding out his hand cordially, "Surely," he said, "you, General, need not ask for ad-

mittance. You know how delighted my mother is to see you." And with these words he ushered the visitor into Madame de Montévreux's boudoir.

The General was evidently pre-occupied. You saw that he had some weight upon his mind, and that he had not come at that early hour to the Duchess to pay an ordinary visit. He was so old and so valued a friend of the whole family, that, when Madame de Montévreux first perceived him, she had some thoughts of consulting him upon the dilemma in which she was placed by the sudden pecuniary distresses of the La Roche Bermonts, and Gaston's positive refusal to marry Olympe; but his first words showed her that she would rather have to play the part of a *confidante* than any other.

The door was scarcely closed, and the General assured that no other ear could hear him, save the one listener he had chosen, than he thus commenced:

"I will not, with you, pretend to anything that is not the real truth." His manner was so

hurried, that it was plainly perceived he was afraid of not saying all he had to say, and so put on a sort of false courage in plunging at once and irrevocably, into the heart of the question. "I have a service to ask of you—and that no ordinary one: do you know anything of Louise?" His voice faltered a little as he pronounced his wife's name.

Madame de Montévreux's only reply was a long and penetrating look.

"I will, if it be necessary, tell you why I ask," he continued; "though I would rather simply receive an answer to my question: do you know anything of Louise?"

"General," replied Madame de Montévreux, "I will not answer that, unless upon one condition: on your word of honour, you will make no use of the information in any way that can be displeasing to her."

"Upon my most sacred word of honour," and M. de Boislambert laid his hand upon his heart.

"Then you shall know all." And the Duchess told her old friend all that had passed for two years; and, when she had done so,

"Remember," said she, "that if there be one human being whom, after my own child, I hold dearer than the rest, *that* being is Louise de Beaumeillant."

The General's eyes filled with tears, as he tenderly kissed the Duchess's hand. He could not speak for some moments; at last,

"Thank you for that," he murmured, in a husky voice; "but call her by *my* name. She is still *my wife*." And, after a few moments' silence, "Do you think she would like to see her children?" he asked, with a certain degree of awkward timidity.

"Oh, General! General!" she exclaimed, "will you do *that?*"

"I will do anything you tell me can comfort her," he answered; "but, if I might—if I could—" he hesitated.

"Do you wish to see her yourself?" asked the Duchess, as though inspired by a sudden thought.

"That is what I scarcely dared to ask," he rejoined.

"And what will prevent Louise from dying of grief?" she retorted.

"Dying!" exclaimed M. de Boislambert, pale as death. "Is she ill?"

"No; that is not what I meant," answered the Duchess. "But, my old and dear friend, why did you not long, long ago, confide to me that you so tenderly loved Louise?"

The General actually blushed. The Duchess held out her hand to him.

"Who has given you the courage to *forgive* thus nobly?" she asked, expecting to hear the name of the Abbé de Nangis as the answer.

"Your sweet friend, Lady Vernon," he replied.

"Ah!" said Madame de Montévreux, musingly. "Indeed! Poor Lady Vernon!"

CHAPTER IX.

On her return from the Tuileries, Lady Vernon had found a note from Madame de Boislambert, begging of her to come to her the next day at Montmorency. Mildred did not hesitate an instant, but on the following afternoon started for the valley.

She found her friend, as she thought, much altered. She had not seen her since the day on which the words of the Abbé de Nangis had caused her such intense pain; and she could not help being impressed by the visible change that had taken place.

The Marchioness was, as usual, attired in deep mourning; but her countenance had assumed an expression still more than ordinarily

in unison with the sadness of her garb. She was seated on a low chair, and leaning on a sofa, upon which were spread out different objects which she took successively from an open box before her. She rose to receive Mildred, and, having affectionately embraced her, made her take a seat on a chair close to her own.

"Lady Vernon," she said, in a low voice, the tones of which seemed to come from a heart half broken, "have you any objection to becoming the depositary of my last confidence, the executrix of my last desires?"

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Mildred, in alarm. "What can you mean?"

"Fear nothing," replied the Marchioness, calmly. "I am not, I believe, likely to meet the natural term of my existence at this exact moment, and be assured that I shall do nothing to hasten it; but there are adieux eternal on this side the grave; and if those were shortly to be pronounced between us, I only ask you, Lady Vernon, would you accept the execution of my last will? Or would you think yourself dis-

honoured by being charged with the performance of the wishes of so condemned a creature as myself?"

"You speak to me in enigmas," answered Mildred; "but I can only say that there is nothing *you* can ask of me which I will not do, no desire to which I will not strictly conform; but do not tell me I am to lose you—"

"I thank you for your generous kindness," interrupted Madame de Boislambert. "My plan (which has been two years in ripening) you shall soon know. But first answer me one question;" the Marchioness took both Lady Vernon's hands, and looked earnestly in her face. "Do you think *they* would let me see my children?" she asked, in a faltering tone. "You could learn this from Madame de Montévreux; for—shall I confess my weakness to you?—I *dare* not ask it myself. If you are refused, I shall know it by your silence; but I could not bear to hear the words—the actual denial. Will you—"

"Marquise," interrupted Lady Vernon, "I

repeat, I will do whatever you choose; but, if I might, I would suggest *another* means: I would advise an application neither to the Duchess nor to Madame de Sestrières, but—" she stopped short, and said no more.

"Do you think *he* would?" demanded the Marchioness, timidly. "I might try it through the Abbé de Nangis."

"Try it *through* no one," answered Lady Vernon; "but ask it in your *own* name. Believe me," she continued, with increasing animation, "believe me, the prayer will be granted. Write to him yourself; so far I will be your intermediary that I will put the letter into his hand; but you will need no auxiliary; a word from you will be sufficient."

"If you really think so," rejoined Madame de Boislambert, "I *will* write; though, Heaven knows, the shame, the humiliation I shall feel in addressing him will go nigh to annihilate every energy I have left. And now," she continued, "there are other things to settle, there lie the dearest treasures of my youth—the

memorials—the relics of all my happy hours," and she pointed to the scattered objects before her. "All that belonged to—" she hesitated, and then continued—"all that could form a record of the affection that once bound me to the *one* for whom I lost my earthly peace, has long since been destroyed. This alone remains," and she took up a gold ring, and tendering it to Mildred; "take it from me," she said; "keep it, wear it, for my sake, and let it eternally remind you that *no* attachment, however pure it may in itself appear, *can endure*, if unhallowed by religion and unsanctioned by society. Nay, dear friend," she pursued, as she saw Mildred turn pale, and instinctively put the ring away, "it *is* a lesson I would give you; I *mean* it as one; and I would have you regard that ring as an emblem of the painful truth I have spoken. He who is now no more, and whom I have long forgiven, dreamt, in putting that ring on my finger, that he was giving me the consecrated symbol of a union he felt could only exist in our hearts. We *then* were both

of us pure as that gold; and what were we later?—and how was the bond snapped, we fancied would last for ever!"

Lady Vernon, absorbed in her own meditations, allowed Madame de Boislambert to place the ring on her unresisting finger.

"But let me entreat of you," cried Mildred, suddenly, starting from her reverie, "let me entreat of you to keep me no longer in suspense. For what purpose are you making these preparations? Surely I am wrong; yet a fearful thought—the convent?"

"No," answered the Marchioness, mournfully. "I do not feel myself qualified for the fulfilment of the duties required by a monastic life. The holy calm has not yet descended *here*," and she laid her hand upon her heart. "But, as I said, you shall know of my plans. Look at this veil; it enshrouded me at the altar on the day when I pledged a faith I wanted strength to keep. It is a fatal gift, and must not be bequeathed to any of those who have yet a trust to betray. Carry it to Madame de Montévreux from me—

to her it must be harmless; and tell her to call to mind that she aided to re-fasten it upon my head as we were leaving the sacristy after the ceremony had been performed."

"But the Abbé?" said Mildred, who appeared intent only on following out her own internal train of reasoning. "But M. de Nangis—surely he cannot counsel?"

"Dear friend," rejoined the Marchioness, "do you think that *now* I would take any step to which he had not consented?" Mildred remained silent—the Marquise took from the sofa a small parcel, and drew forth from it a long scarf of India muslin. Pressing it to her lips: "This said she,—I would have my daughter preserve—I wore it before a guilty thought had won admittance to my mind—I wore it the first time I knelt to receive communion at the altar—I would have her wear it also in that solemn hour, and may the sentiments of adoration, of reverence which that day transported me as I bent my head in mute humility, inspire her also. Oh! my sweet childhood!" cried the Marquise bitterly, "how your memory

rushes back on me!" and she again pressed to her lips the tissue, which, unrolling itself, fell in cloud-like folds upon the sombre draperies of her dress.

During the last few seconds, Lady Vernon had become aware that something unusual was passing in the ante-room adjoining the apartment in which she was seated with the Marchioness. She heard Marceline's voice, though not raised to any very high pitch, still uttering, in a tone of decided resistance, words, the precise import of which she could not seize. Suddenly the discussion ended—if that can well be termed a discussion in which *one* voice only is heard—and for an instant silence reigned.

Madame de Boislambert was too much absorbed in her reflections, too much lost in the dreams of a by-gone and innocent age, to attend for the moment to what was passing around; and Lady Vernon had begun to imagine she had been mistaken, when the sound of a footstep, steady and commanding, struck upon her ear. She made a movement which Madame de Boislambert did not perceive. The steps ceased,

and the lock of the door moved. Mildred stretched forth her arm, and seized the Marchionesses hand. The door opened, and M. de Boislambert stood before them.

The Marchioness neither screamed nor fainted. She rose, and her first glance, before she knew who the unbidden stranger was, rested on the General's mild and mournful countenance. You might have traced the blood as it receded towards the sources of life, and left her no less inanimate than a figure made of stone.

The General advanced a few steps, and closed the door. Lady Vernon, scarcely aware of what she was doing, advanced on her side to meet him, and they shook hands silently.

The Marchioness had not moved. She stood upright, her eyes intently bent upon the ground. M. de Boislambert gazed at her with a mixture of feelings too contradictory for any one in particular to be manifested by his countenance. As she stood thus before him she had so deeply wronged,—self-accused, and self-condemned, she had involuntarily more the appearance of a martyr than of a culprit. Gradually, and as it

were beneath the mute influence of his glance, she sank—sank as a ship goes down at sea,—slowly, steadily, majestically, and the waves of her shame closed over her.

Without uttering one word, the General advanced towards her, and held out his hand. His countenance was grave and sorrowful in the extreme; but it was the gravity of a great resolve, the sorrow that, accompanying forgiveness, mourns over the fallen, and resents not, while it still remembers, the injury.

Madame de Boislambert did not take her husband's hand; but, imperceptibly sinking lower and more low before him, lay literally prostrate at his feet, her head humbled in the dust. The General looked at her for an instant, and then, bending down, took her hand.

"Louise!" he said, in an uncertain tone, and, although he made several efforts to speak, he said no more.

The sound of his voice seemed to have no other effect save still further to crush the already bruised creature at his feet.

"Louise!" he at length repeated, "do not

kneel to me—rise!" and he forcibly raised the prostrate form of the Marchioness.

Madame de Boislambert disengaged herself tremblingly from her husband's arms; and, seating herself upon the nearest chair,

"Oh!" she murmured with anguish, "you can never forget."

"*Never!*" echoed the General, mournfully, shaking his head; "but I can forgive—I have forgiven," he added in a lower and still more solemn tone; and, turning to Mildred, who had withdrawn from the scene, and stood weeping by, "you are a witness and a judge, Lady Vernon," he said, "tell her, if she will not hear me say it—tell her that I bear no enmity in my heart, and that the Father of all mercies has not more entirely pardoned her transgression than I have."

Madame de Boislambert, as Mildred approached her, and tenderly took her hand, ventured, for the first time, to look at the Marquis. All the mildness of his discourse was mirrored in his face. Again he extended

his hand to his wife, and this time she took it, and devoutly raised it to her lips. Mildred saw the General tremble from head to foot.

He seated himself near the Marchioness, her hand in his. "Louise," he commenced, very gravely, but in a steadier tone, "I shall perhaps give you pain by what I am about to say—though, Heaven knows! to do so is far from my intention. I have told you that oblivion is not in my power—I repeat it—I have forgiven, and can never forget. There are things, Louise, which must be remembered; there are pardons —mark this well!—whose sanctity is lost, if the memory of the fault be obliterated, therefore I say, I pardon, and pardon not lightly."

M. de Boislambert remained silent.

"And my children?" demanded the Marchioness, timidly.

"You shall see them whenever you choose it, Louise," he continued, kindly; "they think you are in a far distant land, with relations of your mother's; and they wait for you with the feelings of respect and tenderness which—you

merit," he added in a low tone, but firmly, and as though desirous to show himself thoroughly convinced of what he said.

Hitherto, Madame de Boislambert's naturally proud character had yielded only to a feeling of shame, that crushed her without touching her sensibility. But, by degrees, as her husband's tender kindness in her behalf pierced through the dignity of his manner, her heart had softened, and this last trait of generosity overcame her.

A cry of mingled joy, gratitude, and remorse burst quivering from her lips, and she threw herself at her husband's feet in a state of almost hysterical emotion. The General bent over her, and, as her arms twined themselves round his neck, it would be difficult to say which of the two tried most to hide unavoidable emotion in the bosom of the other.

CHAPTER X.

As soon as Lady Vernon saw that the reconciliation was complete between M. de Boislambert and his wife, she gently drew near to the former, and, taking his hand—"General," she said, entreatingly, "before I leave you, promise me one thing. Promise that you will discover, and prevent the execution of, the plans she has conceived—I know not what they are, but I implore of you to watch well, for I feel that they bode no good to those to whom she is most dear;" and, thus saying, she passed her other arm round the pliant waist of the Marchioness, and drew her tenderly towards her.

"In the first place, Lady Vernon," replied the General, "I must beg of you not to leave us just yet, for I have need of your assistance—of your aid; and, in the next, I hope and trust that Madame la Marquise de Boislambert will henceforward form no plans, but such as may be calculated for the benefit and happiness of her children . . . . . and of all those who know how to appreciate and esteem her," he added in a less assured tone.

The Marchioness did not answer, but her pallid brow and cheek were covered with a deep crimson blush which, quickly subsiding, left her paler than before.

"Speak to me, Louise," continued M. de Boislambert gently—"tell me that you will suffer yourself to be guided in all things by those who have no interest at heart but your own."

"You cannot forget," rejoined the Marquise in a low voice, "neither can I;—do not mistake me," she added hurriedly. "I mean, I cannot forget my crime. Your forgiveness has

lightened far more than I deserved the load that crushed me; but your pardon is not the only one; a higher judge, still, has forgiven, and that forgiveness can only be bought at the price of an entire devotion—of a total...."

"Louise!" exclaimed the General, trembling, and pale with doubt and fear. "What can you mean? to what do your words lead?"

"The way lies clear before me," she replied, "I must take it," and, raising her eyes to Heaven with a look almost of inspiration. "Henceforth I belong to Him," she added with solemnity.

M. de Boislambert rose, and paced impatiently up and down the apartment.

"Speak to her, Lady Vernon," he exclaimed, with unmistakable disquietude piercing through every look and every tone. "Speak to her—tell her it cannot be—that she owes it to—to her children; since they are ever foremost in her mind."

Madame de Boislambert had sunk upon the sofa, and was shrouding her eyes in the muslin

veil which had been that of her first communion. Mildred knelt down beside her, and possessed herself of one of her hands. The General, with one hand thurst into the breast of his coat, as though controlling unseen the unruly beatings of his heart, whilst the other, resting on the back of a chair, clenched the slender rail as though he would break it to atoms,—stood gazing at them with a thousand conflicting emotions passing successively over his features, as storm-clouds in the sky image themselves upon the face of the plain.

Marceline's voice, speaking under the window, broke the silence. "Ay! walk in, M. le *Curé*," said she, "you will find visitors—a strange gentleman; but it is none of my fault."

The Marchioness sprang from her place, and, hastily throwing back the folds of the veil from her head, "The Abbé de Nangis!" cried she, clasping her hands. "I am rescued!"

The General seized the chair on which he was

leaning, and dashed it down with violence on the same spot.

The Abbé entered, and paused upon the threshold of the door.

"My father!" faltered the Marchioness, tottering towards him. "Save me from temptation!"

"Heaven be praised!" murmured the Abbé, devoutly, as he surveyed the group before him; and then, advancing towards M. de Boislambert, "This is well and nobly done, M. le Marquis," said he, holding out his hand. "Now all may yet be right."

"My father!" said Madame de Boislambert, "you surely cannot counsel me to yield to the temptation with which I am surrounded; you will not advise me to re-enter that world from which the memory of a deadly sin for ever separates me?"

"Take care," rejoined M. de Nangis, "that in your reluctance to accept certain painful duties, there be not more pride—nay, worse,

more vanity, than is consistent with the feelings of a Christian."

"But how would you have me return to that society, from whose bosom I am deservedly cast forth?" demanded Madame de Boislambert, with an imploring look.

"How?" ejaculated the General. "How? as *my* wife, supported by *my* arm, sheltered by the roof of *my* house, surrounded by *my* friends, by *my* respect!"

"Oh! my noble husband!" sobbed the Marchioness.

"Render yourself worthy of such a pardon, my child," said M. de Nangis, "by steadfastly discharging all the duties of your station. Let the world see in you an example of every Christian virtue: be upright and humble, be benevolent and just; forget your own sufferings in a constant solicitude for those around you; be useful, and, above all, never despair of yourself."

Madame de Boislambert wept long and bitterly. Lady Vernon leant over her as a

sister, and mingled her tears with those of her friend.

"Louise," at length said the General, advancing to the chair on which his wife was seated, "will you come with me?"

The Marchioness threw her arms round him, and buried her head in his breast. He bent over her, and in a low voice murmured,—"I hurt you, perhaps, when I said I could not forget—but I will try to do so; you will teach me, Louise, and we will hope for better times;" and tenderly, gently, as a mother comforts a child, did he strive to comfort the wretched being who hung weeping upon his neck. Gradually she became calmer, and, at last, raised her drooping head and pale brow from their resting-place.

"It is over now," she said, in a hollow voice, and—" extricating herself from her husband's arms, "I will be firm. This generosity, this tenderness—Heaven knows how little deserved! I will treasure up in my heart of hearts to the last moment of my life—but no prayers, no

considerations of any kind," and her voice sunk to a whisper, "shall induce me to repay such kindness with dishonour."

"Dishonour!" echoed the Marquis and the Abbé, in the same breath.

Madame de Boislambert smiled a mournful smile. "You, M. l'Abbé," said she, "who regard things merely from a Christian point of view, *may* be ignorant of these things; but you," turning to her husband, "are not; you *know* what dishonour attaches to the name of the man who *forgives;* nay, worse even than dishonour—*ridicule.* However noble may be the promptings of your own heart, however you may wish to restore the guilty one to her former place, there is a law which says, you shall not do so. And do you believe," she continued, with increasing animation, "do you think that I will expose the father of my children to be a mark for the world's scorn?"

"Ay!" sighed the General, bitterly, "there it is!—'the father of her children'; as such only am I thought of! Louise!" cried he,

seizing both her hands, and looking her steadily in the face, "there is no further use in disguising a secret of which the Abbé has long since received the confession, and which Lady Vernon has long since guessed. You speak as if, in all this, the sole question to be decided upon were the adoption of a more or less fitting course. You do not appear to guess that it may be a question of sentiment—a question in which the impulses of the heart escape all the calculations and decrees of mere reason. In a word, will you do nothing for *my happiness ?*"

Madame de Boislambert gazed upon her husband's countenance, and there read what she could not mistake. Her surprise at the discovery was visible.

"Yes," exclaimed the Marquis, answering his wife's look, "yes, Louise, it *is* so ! I have suffered more than my nearest, oldest friends are aware of. I have vainly tried every remedy ; I have sought every cure—absence, exertion, change of scene. I have tempted death in every shape, and have only found distinction. But,

Louise," he resumed, with a melancholy smile, "if the glory I have gained, and which is to you indifferent, has not for one second healed the wounds of my heart, it has at least given to me a mantle ample enough to enshroud in its folds, and preserve from the world's arrows, those who stand near to me, and whose honour is my own. I have renown enough now to cover the failings of those I love. I am permitted to follow in some things the dictates of my heart; and again I ask, will you do nothing for my happiness? Do not," he added, seeing she was about to speak, "do not consider me only as the 'father of your children.' I have told you what I perhaps ought scarcely to have avowed even to myself. I have bared my heart before you; I have shown you its inmost weaknesses. Will you go with me now, Louise?" and, whilst uttering these last words, his voice faltered so as to become almost unintelligible.

Madame de Boislambert, pale as death, knelt at her husband's feet, and replied slowly, and in hardly audible accents,

"I will do whatever you desire."

The General gazed at his kneeling wife, and, after an effort, the violence of which was attested by the workings of the muscles of his face.

"You are free!" he said, in a voice which, though mournful, was firm. "You are free, Madame La Marquise de Boislambert. Act as you think *right*—my home is yours—my house is open to you; but if your conscience commands you to refuse the only gift I can offer, do so! I am no tyrant, and would not accept even a look, a word of kindness that should not be dictated by your heart. If you think that your road through life *ought* to be separate from mine, take it, and may He, in whom we all believe, be your supporter!"

The General did not this time extend his hand to his wife, or bend down towards her. She gave no other answer to his words save continued sobs and tears. He waited another instant. His very lips were blanched, and his whole soul was in his eyes; but no word came from his kneeling wife. "Adieu, Louise!" he

said, as he snatched his hat from the table on which it lay. "Heaven is my witness, I came here but to try to alleviate your sorrows—and I have failed. I aspired but to offer you every comfort, every consolation I could command—and you have disdained them all. Farewell!"

Before Lady Vernon could withhold him, M. de Boislambert had left the room and the house.

"Oh! Father Almighty!" exclaimed the unhappy Marchioness, clasping her hands in passionate prayer, "give me strength—I can bear no more!" and she sank exhausted upon the ground. Lady Vernon and the Abbé raised her up.

"And why, my daughter, have you deemed it necessary to bear so much?" asked the latter.

"I have the sins of *two* souls to answer for," she replied solemnly. "The expiation of my own sin is not my only duty; and the divine doctrine of reversibility, in which you have taught me to believe, requires from me a sacrifice in behalf of the misguided one, who, unbidden,

rushed so impiously into the awful presence of his Maker. Will you, too, abandon me?" she said, looking imploringly at the Abbé. "Will you not pray that my undertaking may be blessed?"

M. de Nangis laid his hand impressively on the bowed head of his penitent, and breathed a mental prayer as he raised his eyes devoutly to heaven.

"But," demanded Lady Vernon, earnestly, and tenderly embracing the Marchioness, "upon what sacrifice are you intent? You say you do not incline to entering a convent; but, if not for the habit of a nun, for what other will you then exchange this attire which you regard as too worldly?"

"For that of a sister of charity," replied the Marchioness.

CHAPTER XI.

Some days after this scene at the cottage, it had been agreed, through the mediation of Madame de Montévreux and Lady Vernon, that Madame de Boislambert, whatever she might decide upon ultimately, should be allowed to see her children whenever she thought fit to do so. As it was not considered advisable to admit any one else into the secret, the Marquis was forced to submit to the painful necessity of again meeting his wife; and, in order to keep matters as quiet as possible, the following plan was agreed upon: the General, under the pretext of keeping some *soi-disant* promise to his little ones, was to beg them of Madame de Sestrières on

the day appointed, and, dispensing with the attendance of even the governess, he was to carry them to St. Germain. Between two and three o'clock, on the terrace, close by the first gate leading into the forest, the Marchioness was to be in waiting, and there, to all appearance an ordinary acquaintance, was accidentally to meet the party, and wander with them into the most secluded of the woodland paths. It was supposed that the children would, in the space of more than two years, have entirely forgotten their mother, and as she answered for her composure under the hard trial, every one united in thinking it far wiser that she should pass in her children's eyes for a friend of their father's, encountered by chance.

On the day appointed, therefore, M. de Boislambert drove, with his children, to the railroad station, and there started with them for St. Germain. They reached the terrace and the gate, but no one was visible; and M. de Boislambert seated himself, with his two little charges, on a low wooden bench. The day was mild and

beautiful in the extreme, and might have seemed almost too hot, had it not been for the gentle breezes that came from the woods, turning into so many fans the broad leaves of the high trees.

The sadness of their father's countenance could not escape the notice of the youthful watchers, sharp-sighted like all their infant tribe. The instinct which makes birds nestle together in silent alarm at the approach of a thunder-storm, warned likewise these little flutterers that there was no kindred joy in their parent's heart, and damped that which was ever ready to expand in their own.

Marie was now eight years old, and her brother one year younger. Octave, as we have said, was his mother's living image; tall for his age, slender, graceful as a creole, and with all the peculiar charm of expression that formed the irresistible beauty of the Marchioness's countenance. His love for his father was not expansive, and to the outward expression of it there seemed to exist some secret restriction. He

nurtured, on the contrary, sentiments of perfect adoration for the memory of the Marquise, and had the General been aware to what an extent these were carried, he would probably have been less ready to try the experiment of a meeting between the mother and son.

The idolatry, on the other hand, of which the Marquis was the object on the part of his little daughter is not to be described. She literally worshipped him. It was that reverential love of infancy, so exquisite in woman, and which many feminine natures preserve to a much later age.

Marie had thrown off her straw bonnet on the grass, and sat at her father's feet. Her beautiful head, with its long chestnut curls, rested on the General's knee, pillowed on her bent arm in that sweet attitude which children alone and kittens know how to adopt. With her father's own blue eyes, the girl looked wistfully into her father's face. Her little brother sat, or rather reclined, at the extremity of the bench; his head resting on his hand, and

his feet stretched out as on a couch, while his vague upturned glances seemed to search in the fleeting clouds of the bright May Heaven for the solution of some enigma.

It would be difficult to fancy a more interesting group than that formed by the General and his children.

There is always something peculiarly beautiful in the interchange of caresses between manhood and infancy, and, in this instance, it was more than a merely beautiful, it was a touching sight —to see that tall, commanding, stalwart man, whose strength seemed sufficient to enable him to stand unarmed against a host—to see him alone and desolate in heart, seeking sympathy and companionship in the society of an infant—dependent for solace and comfort on the love of a little child.

M. de Boislambert was too much engaged with his daughter to pay great attention to his son, and he had not observed that, for the last few moments, the boy was a prey to some unusual emotion. He had risen from his

reclining posture, and was watching with an intense eagerness which paled his cheek and stopped his breathing, some object hidden from the General's view.

"Now confess, papa," insisted the little girl, pursuing the thread of a conversation she had commenced with her father upon certain romantic details of his last Algerian campaign: "confess that you never gave a thought, in the midst of all your glory, to your poor little Marie, who was waiting for you at home! I know you did *not*, for one day I asked Madame de Sestrières, and she said you had plenty of graver things in your head to occupy you without thinking of little children like Octave and me;—but pray now, papa," she resumed, "if you never thought of us, then tell me, what did you think of?"

The boy sprung from the bench.

"Mamma!" he exclaimed with a cry that was scarcely human, as he darted off in the direction of a female figure, just then emerging from beneath the trees.

The Marchioness had gained the terrace some time before those whom she had appointed to meet there, and, whilst awaiting the hour of their arrival, had wandered forth thoughtfully under the shade of the forest trees. For the last quarter of an hour she had stood at a slight distance from the group, and had watched, as she thought unobserved, all that was dearest to her upon earth—all to which she was so soon to bid an eternal farewell.

She was not sorry to steel herself by degrees to the sight of her children, and to guard against the surprise, which otherwise might, at their first aspect, have menaced the forced composure to which she was condemned. But the sound of her child's voice, and his unexpected recognition of her, overthrew her firmness.

When M. de Boislambert, startled by Octave's exclamation, hastened to the spot whither the boy had flown, he found at the foot of a tree the mother and her son, the latter clinging with all his might to that neck which had been the pillow of his childhood; and the former, sinking

from exhaustion and emotion, and covering with tears and convulsive kisses the young face that was imploringly turned towards her own.

The approach of the Marquis and his daughter restored Madame de Boislambert to a sense of her situation. Collecting herself by an heroic effort of will, and wiping from her eyes her still flowing tears, she saluted the General with a presence of mind he could not easily imitate.

"M. de Boislambert," said she, in a tone that she could not keep from faltering, "This is then your son?" and she vainly tried to draw forward the trembling boy, who crouched near and nearer to her, as though feeling instinctively that she would be torn from him. The General bowed; Marie gazed intently at the strange lady, but evidently did not recognise her.

"Your sweet boy," resumed the Marquise, with a smile that convulsed her quivering lips, "has caused me, as you perceive, innocently, a lively emotion. You are aware of how I lost my own son—and you can guess what I felt at hearing him so suddenly call me by a mother'

name....."—Madame de Boislambert could not continue. She covered her face with her handkerchief and wept aloud.

"Oh! mamma—mamma!" sobbed the anxious boy; "do not talk so! do not say you are not my own dear mother....my darling mother....my mother with the soft brown eyes!"

"How silly you are!" interrupted Marie, disdainfully and in an under tone. "This lady is very handsome, but she is not the least like mamma."

During this discussion between the children, Madame de Boislambert and her husband remained silent. Alternately looking at one another and upon the ground, they were both too much agitated to utter a word. At length, the Marquis—compassionating the heroic efforts he witnessed on the part of his wife, and to which, though he approved not the object they were destined to achieve, he could not deny the tribute of his admiration—approached a step

nearer to her, and, with the ceremonious politeness to which the character she had assumed constrained him.

"Believe me, Madame Fournier," he said, "I can but too well enter into your feelings—no one has felt more deeply for your sufferings than I have ;—but do not allow the presence of my poor child to affect you so painfully. Poor little fellow !" he continued with a sigh ; "it is so long since he has been deprived of his own mother, that I did not think his feelings for her would still exist in such vivacity, but it is natural that, in his bereavement, he should fly with delight towards a person who evidently, in his idea, bears a strong resemblance to the image his memory has so faithfully preserved."

"Papa !" exclaimed the boy, seizing with one hand a hand of the General's, and, with the other, still retaining his hold on the Marquise—"Do *you* tell her to stay with us. Pray ! pray, dear papa !" continued the little supplicant ; "I am sure she will mind you—tell her I shall die

if she leaves us....Papa!" he added, in piercing tones of misery, "tell her so! tell her so! or I know she will go away again!"

The anguish of both M. de Boislambert and his wife may be better imagined than described at these heart-rending appeals.

"My poor Octave," said the General, biting his lips in agony; "you must not indeed torment this lady, I have no influence over her," and he accompanied these last words with a look at his wife, that well nigh felled her to the earth.

The child cast upon his father a glance of wrathful indignation, such as one could scarcely have believed so frail a creature capable of harbouring in his soul.

"It is all your fault!—you do not want her to stay. You do not love her, and I will never love you again!" exclaimed he, in a paroxysm of concentrated ire.

The General tried in vain to reply to his son's invective; he *could* not.

Madame de Boislambert felt the moment was

come when her decision must save them all; and, accordingly, detaching the boy's hands from her dress :—

"Indeed," she replied, with a last sublime effort, "I should be very sorry to have near me so exceedingly naughty a child, and, if I had to choose, would much prefer your sister," and so saying, she drew Marie towards her and imprinted a fervent—oh! how fervent!—kiss on her young brow.

The poor boy looked at the Marquise, as he now allowed himself unresistingly to be led away from her side—murmuring as he went:

"I do believe now that you are not my own mamma, for she would never have turned me away from her!" and then, giving way to a fresh burst of grief, "I shall never, never see her again!" he sobbed. "I have watched for her every day—Oh! mamma! mamma!" he cried, in tones that rent every fibre of both the wretched parents' hearts; "will you never come back to us? Shall I never see you again?"

"Marie," said M. de Boislambert, and the

words almost choked him; "take your brother with you, and walk on;—Madame Fournier," he contrived to say loud enough for the children to hear, "pray take my arm."

The Marchioness accepted it, for she could support herself no longer.

Who shall describe the mingled sensations of M. de Boislambert, as he once more felt, resting upon his own, the arm of his long absent wife? The hearts of both beat rapidly, and each felt the quicker flow of the vital current in the other swell under the trembling pressure of the arm.

They walked for some moments in utter silence, deeper and deeper into the green glades of the woods. At length, the Marchioness could advance no further.

"Ferdinand," she murmured, in a voice almost extinct, and for the first time calling her husband by his name, "I can go no further. This has been too much!" And the deadly hue of her face sufficiently showed that she spoke truth. Hurrying forward a few steps, and supporting almost entirely upon his arm

the loved weight of the sinking form, the Marquis reached one of the rude benches placed in various parts of the forest, and deposited upon it his nearly lifeless burthen.

For a few moments the Marchioness appeared unable to support herself, and the General tendered mutely to her such assistance as she seemed to require. Gradually, however, she recovered, and a certain appearance of life returned to her cheek and lips.

They sat together upon that bench in silence; around them no sound save the soft fluttering of the wind-stirred leaves, and the low twitter of the birds preparing to roost. They were themselves sheltered by the cool shade of the broad boughs; but in the deep verdant dells beyond they saw the burning beams of the golden sun lie lazily on the green velvet of the grass.

At some little distance before them lay the two children, on whom Madame de Boislambert's glances were riveted: her husband's were fixed upon her. Their eyes met at last; and if

in his wife's look the General read but little hope, his heart at least must have rejoiced at the depth of tenderness he discovered there.

"Will you leave *them*, Louise?" he asked. It was all he said. She held out her hand to her husband, and, averting her head,

"Pray to the Almighty that He may take pity on me," she said, with so mournful a look and so mournful a tone, that no human heart could have withstood the appeal.

M. de Boislambert raised his wife's hand to his lips, and held it long in his; but they spoke no other word.

As they were proceeding homewards, towards the spot where Madame de Boislambert had left the carriage which had brought her to St. Germain, they came to the turning of an alley so abrupt, that, before the Marchioness could lower her veil, she found herself face to face with a lady and a young man, who were coming in the contrary direction.

The lady surveyed Madame de Boislambert from head to foot, with haughty disdain, and

then, with affectation, gathering up her light dress as she passed, as though to prevent its coming in contact with the Marchioness's robe, she laughed, a harsh, discordant, bitter laugh, and, turning to her companion,

"That is the worst of these environs of Paris," said she; "since the establishment of the rail-road, one cannot come to them without being exposed to meet all sorts of improper persons."

The General was not near his wretched wife at this moment. Marie had begged of him to gather for her a branch of honey-suckle she could not reach; and he was with the children, hidden from view, when the elegant and haughty fair one passed, who threw at Madame de Bois-lambert the insult we have recorded. But the words fell on his ear.

"Whose voice was that?" he ejaculated, as, quivering with fury, he sprang from the shadow of the thicket, and looked upon his crushed wife.

"It was Madame de Cévèzes who spoke," replied the Marchioness.

"But she was not alone!" he retorted, with eyes that flashed fury. "A man was with her, whose life's blood shall answer!"

"Oh! Ferdinand! hush!" said his wife, laying her hand gently upon his uplifted arm. "You see now that *I was right*, and that it *must* be!"

The General's arm fell powerless by his side; and, in a few seconds, Madame de Boislambert entered her carriage, and drove away.

As the sound of the wheels receded in the distance, the General stood rooted to the spot where he had last seen his wife, and did not notice the fond anxiety with which his children were looking up into his face.

CHAPTER XII.

The embassy was again to open its doors to the crowd, and had announced a ball for the 15th of May. It was to be a splendid affair, and Mildred could not refuse to go there in company with Lady Augusta Danvers. But at this moment she was ill-suited for such festivities, not so much from her own personal state of feeling, as from what had occurred touching Madame de Boislambert.

From the day on which, together with Madame de Montévreux, Mildred had helped to arrange the meeting between the mother and her children, no one had any tidings of the Marquise. She had written, under the date of the identical day on which she had gone to St.

Germain, a few lines to Mildred and to the Duchesse (with, enclosed in the envelope of the latter, a note to Madame de Moreton) bidding them a tender but eternal farewell; and all further efforts to discover a trace of her were abortive. The only person who could have given authentic news of Madame de Boislambert, the Abbé, preserved upon this subject a determined and inflexible silence.

The Duchess was sincerely grieved, and Mildred profoundly afflicted. She executed all the Marchioness's commissions religiously;—distributed the various little gifts she had marked out, and kept for herself the gold ring, which was the emblem of what to Mildred seemed the tacit condemnation of her own conduct; still, it was the last legacy of one whom she should never see more, and as such she wore it, and it grew sacred in her eyes.

Mildred was in herself so troubled,—her mind was in such an unquiet state, that almost any distraction was now acceptable, and she frequently sought society for the sole purpose of

escaping from her own thoughts. Yes ! Lady Vernon, who but so lately had flattered herself that, because free from absolute guilt, she was virtuous—was now, neither more nor less than the positively guilty, driven to fly from herself and seek refuge in the crowd !

On the evening in question, however, Mildred had an invincible desire to stay at home. She felt a reluctance to mingle in the noisy diversions of a ball-room, even beyond what she could reasonably account for. But Lady Augusta was not so easily to be eluded, and she had fixed ten o'clock as the hour at which Mildred was to be ready to accompany her.

The evening was sultry; storm-clouds were gathering round the horizon, and, as Mildred sat at the open window of her dressing-room, broad flashes of lightning from time to time lighted up the distance. From the gardens of the Tuileries, opposite, the perfume of the lilacs and chestnut-blossoms came almost too powerfully ; and, under its influence, combined

with that of the electricity with which the air was charged, Lady Vernon fell into a state of nervous irritability in which, like the chords of an Æolian harp, every fibre of her being quivered, ready to respond to the passing current of every fitful thought.

To all her abigail's questions as to how she would be attired, she returned answers that completely discouraged the attentive *soubrette*, and left her no choice but to follow the dictates of her own individual judgment.

Far, far away, were Lady Vernon's thoughts at that moment. They had transported her to her native northern hills, till she almost fancied she could hear the lonely wail of the black-cock on the moor, and feel the heath-scented breeze of the fir-woods, upon her brow. Why had she ever left them? Why had she sought for more than her own fair country could afford? and what, if she returned thither now? No! He was there too; and had taken possession of the last strong-hold of her child-hood's recollections. There was not one spot now

that was free from the intruder. Not a bleak, barren fell, but his shadow lay upon it—not a wave of the rushing rivers but syllabled his name !—and on the threshold of the temple raised in her heart to the memory of her youth, stood a figure that henceforward forbade her approaching the sanctuary.

An organ in the street began at this moment to play the first notes of Schubert's *Adieu.* Mildred started on her chair, and, turning suddenly round, gave her purse into the hands of her attendant, with a vehement command that the musician should be silenced or sent elsewhere.

When the astonished, tirewoman returned, she found her mistress, much to her satisfaction, examining herself in her glass. Lady Vernon had never looked more beautiful. There was about her something strange, and not quite natural; but this only served to enhance her loveliness.

Mildred with her own hands settled her *coiffure,* a kind of elaborately-worked gold

caul, which, falling on either side in two square lappets, down to the middle of the throat, enclosed the face as it were in a frame, and showed to peculiar advantage the pure outline of the facial oval, and of the classically-shaped head, much after the fashion of the coifs worn by ladies in the sixteenth century.

"Well! my lady!" exclaimed Brookes, in uncontrollable ecstacy. "I never did see your ladyship look anything like so beautiful as you do to-night!"

Mildred fixed upon her *Psyché* a curious glance that seemed as though, from the inanimate mirror itself, it sought to draw forth a tribute of admiration more unequivocal than the mere senseless reflection it yielded of her image. A smile parted Lady Vernon's lips as she gazed, for she could not but feel that she *was* undeniably lovely; and yet the smile was not a smile of pride. No! nor of vanity. It was despondING, sad, and melancholy as the last look of an abdicating sovereign at the royal insignia she is about to resign. And yet, evidently, Lady

Vernon was not sorry to be sure of her own beauty on that night.

A flash of lightning, that extinguished the wax tapers nearest the window, followed by a violent peal of thunder, roused Mildred from the abstraction into which she had fallen.

"Goodness me! how awful!" ejaculated the *soubrette*, hardly daring to lift up her eyes—"and there's the rain!—pray, my lady—hadn't I better shut the window?"

Mildred smiled disdainfully at her attendant's cowardice.

"You may draw down the blind, if you like," she replied, out of mere good-nature, "but as to shutting the window, we should expire with the heat!"

Lady Vernon's attire was extremely simple; she wore a white crape dress, striped with infinitely small threads of gold—the rare and precious production of an Oriental loom; and spreading its light draperies over the folds of a thick silk, it showed well the rounded, and yet slender grace of Mildred's symmetrical figure,

and accorded perfectly with the head-dress she had adopted.

When Lady Augusta's carriage drove to the door, Mildred was in readiness, and soon found herself on her road to the Embassy, with her friends.

"What a night!" exclaimed Lady Augusta. "If I had not been *obliged* to go to this ball, I certainly would not have stirred out; but, unfortunately, one *must* do these things."

"*Must* one?" said Mildred.

Lady Augusta did not hear her, but the light of a street lamp, under the rays of which they happened at that precise moment to be passing, showed Lady Vernon, by the smile on Mr. Danvers's face, that *he* had done so, and that he coincided with her upon the cruel necessity which forces people, who care nothing for the masters of the house whither they are going, and for whom those masters care just as little, to devote themselves to the pleasures of society, and dignify with the name of duty what is a mere sacrifice to their meanest and least avowable vanities.

The ball was what is termed very brilliant, and voted by the indifferent a most delightful *fête;* inasmuch as, given by the representative of a foreign power, whose first care had been to study the manners, habits, and susceptibilities of the nation to whose court he was accredited, the natives of that nation were not exposed to meet persons whom they would have objected to receive in their own private *salons*, which is more than can be said in many cases that might be mentioned. The society was well chosen, and presented a sufficient mixture of talent and high birth to be both aristocratical and interesting.

Mildred, leaning on the arm of Mr. Danvers, advanced from room to room, until she stopped in one devoted to *causerie*, and apart from the tumult of the ball. A seat was vacant on a sofa at the upper end, and there Lady Vernon begged her companion to leave her. She had not been there above a quarter of an hour, surrounded by the dandy-flatterers whom her presence never failed to attract, when the lady

who had occupied the place next to her having moved away, Lord Bournemouth hastened to take possession of it.

"You came with the Danverses, did you not?" was the first question; and to the affirmative answer he received,

"Well," he replied, "you will never guess into what hands Lady Augusta, under pretence of getting amongst the French, has fallen! I should have thought Lady Marion was bad enough; but this last is indeed going from Scylla to Charybdis."

"What has happened?" enquired Mildred, with real interest.

"Lady Marion has introduced her to her friend, Mrs. Beverly," he replied; "and I cannot tell *you* what I overheard *her* say; but, perhaps, if you ask Lady Augusta, she will tell you herself."

Mrs. Beverly, be it remarked *en passant*, was a kind of spurious London *Lionne*, who, having ceased to be tolerated at home, had resolved to try a campaign abroad. Lady Augusta

Danvers would not have dreamed of bowing to Mrs. Beverly in the park; but, in the Champs Elysées, it was perhaps possible, considering that she knew some of the "best of the French."

This was Mrs. Beverly's plan;—like the man who was *savant parmi les gentilhommes, et gentilhomme parmi les savants,* she ingratiated herself with some of the French, by being supposed to be acquainted with the higher classes of the English, and contrived to keep still on the right side of the door with some of her country-people, from being believed to have the *entrée* of certain good French *salons.*

At the present moment, Mrs. Beverly was exceedingly intimate with a person high in office and in his own opinion; whose vanity she flattered, and to whom she wished everybody to imagine her nearly related. Resembling in appearance what—if there were hack-cabs in the desert—one might suppose a dromedary *de fiacre* to become after having once been a dromedary *de course,* the male part of the creation pre-

tended to think Mrs. Beverly a handsome woman, on the principle of certain picture-fanciers, who swear to the veriest daub in their collection being a Raphael, for fear they should be suspected of having been taken in.

Just as Lord Bournemouth had uttered the last words we have repeated, an enormously fat old woman, a perfect walking turtle, was seen emerging from an inner room.

"Here comes the *outrageousest* old sinner upon earth," uttered Lord Bournemouth, and he had not time to say more before the lady in question, Lady Electra Thompson, had waddled to his side.

"Oh! thank Heaven! I have at last found some one to whom I can speak!" she exclaimed, in puffy tones. "You don't know what has happened—you can't guess the inimitable scene at which I have just been present!.... Only imagine that horrible raw-boned Mrs. *Bee*verley —as that ass, Mowbray, calls her—having made acquaintance just now with a woman whom I have been too long out of England to recognise,

but who appears the very pink of propriety, (a sort of Lord Malvern in petticoats). I was sitting by, looking on, when all at once *La Beverly* begins to chaunt old Musselborough's praises. When this topic was well exhausted.

"'I suppose,' says she, turning to the pious woman beside her; 'I suppose you are aware of the connexion between us?'

"Now, Piety, who, I conclude, was not at all aware that her companion holds to the honour of being thought old Musselborough's mother's aunt's fifth cousin; looked much as though you had asked her whether she were an atheist. The sharp-nosed woman actually blushed blue, like a bruise, and then stammered (I heard her, !) 'Since you mention it yourself, I will avow that I have heard it said; but I assure you that I never would permit myself to believe it till now.'

"I could not wait to hear the rejoinder, for I thought I should have burst," added the ponderous narrator of the tale, her fat sides shaking with laughter. "But is it possible that

you knew nothing of this? Why, all the world is talking of it! — of it, and something else, too."

"I beg to say, Lady Electra," replied Lord Bournemouth, "that I knew all about it, but I did not venture to relate it—before ladies," he added, glancing at Lady Vernon, "but *you* can say anything." This, the fat woman took as an evident compliment, "And now," he asked, "what is the other history?"

"Oh!" she rejoined — "only, that Madame de Cévèzes pretends that she met *La Boislambert* the other day in the forest of St. Germain.

"Indeed! and what did she do?"

"Why, I fancy she played prude," replied Lady Electra, "for she seems about as shocked at the encounter as a person so lately readmitted into society ought to be. The long and the short of vice, my dear Lord, in this town is,"——

"Mrs. Beverly and Madame de Cévèzes," interrupted Lord Bournemouth, directing Lady

Electra's attention to the two ladies who were approaching arm in arm; the one almost inclined to bend her head by courtesy as she passed under the door-ways, and the other scarcely more than reaching to her friend's elbow.

"You are really too wicked!" exclaimed Lady Electra.

"How it befits you to say that!" replied Lord Bournemouth, with a flattering smile. "But all your adventures are not worth the scene I witnessed last night at our embassy. By the bye, where were you, Lady Electra, that you were not there?"

The unwieldy personage knew not how to blush, otherwise she would have done so, for she grew internally scarlet at the idea that Lord Bournemouth was aware of her not being invited to the "small" parties at Lady C—'s. Without waiting for her answer, he went on:

"Proud of being bidden to a 'select' reunion, Mrs. Starchley had just sailed into the first *salon*, in all the stiff consciousness of strict morality, when the first object her eyes beheld

was—guess!—well, you can't;—why, Madame la Marquise de Montdord in person, leaning on the arm of Lady Marston!"

Mildred could not help listening, for she involuntarily recollected the meeting she had herself witnessed at the *salon*.

"The sight," pursued Lord Bournemouth, "positively took away her breath. She gasped and stared as though her great eyes would have started from their sockets. She had been for the last three weeks thanking her stars that there were spots where offended innocence could take refuge without the fear of being contaminated by the contact of the 'improper,' and that the English embassy was one of these 'green spots on *virtue's* waste.' She had also uttered thanksgivings that such women as Lady Marston existed to uphold the cause of the godly; and now, here were all her imaginings and hopes overthrown. I wish you could have seen her—that was what I call indeed a *désillusion*; after that, nothing worse can befal! Madame

de Montdord at the British Ambassador's 'select' *soirées*, and leaning on the arm of the British lion's own lioness—the 'warranted' *virtuous* Lady Marston! You may talk of deceptions, Lady Electra; but after that, I know of no one who should pretend to have felt them in all their bitterness."

Lady Electra's fit of laughter at Lord Bournemouth's story was such as to threaten convulsions; and really she looked so frightful, that Lady Vernon turned away her head: she was sick at heart; disgusted with the indelicate vulgarity of Lady Electra; sorry for what had happened to Mr. Danvers's wife, and inwardly sighing over a thousand recollections.

Two years before, on that very spot, in that same room, on that same sofa, she had sat, having by her side Gaston de Montévreux, who had yielded his place to one who had later become a very dear friend to her. She thought she again saw the Duchess coming towards her with Madame de Moreton on her arm; and thereby, could not

avoid contrasting the seeming difference between the Viscountess's position and her own then, and the *real* difference between them now.

"She is very pretty!" said a voice behind Lady Vernon. "With that wreath of white narcissus, she looks quite like a bride."

"Well," according to public report, it is what she soon will be," added another voice. Lady Vernon looked up, and could not refrain from starting. The Duchess was before her, even as on the night Mildred had been dreaming of, and on her arm another fair young creature—as young and as fair as Clémentine.

Lady Vernon felt that Mademoiselle de La Roche Bermont stood before her, long before Madame de Montévreux's niece turned to her aunt, and, in the ringing, silvery tones of girlhood, disclosed to the Duchess how in Mildred she recognised her preserver.

"Dear Olympe," rejoined Gaston's mother, affectionately, "as Lady Vernon probably saved you upon that occasion, I hope I may venture to promise that she will remain your

friend through life;" and, officially presenting Mademoiselle de La Roche Bermont to Mildred: "I have not promised too much, have I, dear Lady Vernon?" she added, in her sweetest tones.

Mildred felt she could not answer: she bowed, tried to smile, and said she felt very faint. Her head reeled, and, like all those who feel consciousness gradually receding from them, she sought some object on which steadily to attach her gaze. Her eye fell only on Madame de Boislambert's fatal ring!

CHAPTER XIII.

THAT "coming events" do "cast their shadows before," is a thing not to be denied. With women who are physically nervous, or who, without being so naturally, have, by a strong pre-occupation of the heart, had their nervous system wound up to a high degree of tension, this presentiment rarely fails.

As to those who have studied the variations of the atmosphere, there is a moment, when, however their faces may be turned from the West, they feel that the star of day has declined, so, to those whose every fibre, sharpened to the fatal watch, has learnt to thrill at the slightest change in the uncertain climate of the heart, a nameless chill instantaneously

tells when the sun of their happiness has set.

Over poor Lady Vernon, this fatal "shadow" of "coming events" had for some time past been stealing. Her health, too, was beginning visibly to suffer from this one constant, undefinable, wearing pain; her heart ached.

Mildred had left the ball at the Embassy almost immediately after her meeting with Madame de Montévreux. She had not fainted, so as to draw upon her the attention of the crowd, but she was nearly as pale and as inanimate as though consciousness had entirely deserted her. Taking the arm of Mr. Danvers, to whom she pretexted a sudden indisposition, brought on by the heat of the rooms and the sultriness of the overcharged atmosphere, she escaped.

The next morning found her scarcely less suffering, and certainly not less anxious. She had not seen Gaston the night before, at the ball, from the circumstance of her having stayed there barely an hour, and having left it before he arrived.

She had not only a great grief, she had also a great annoyance to contend with; a letter from Baden-Baden informed her Sir Edward had been for the last three weeks (the period of his arrival there) an ardent, and generally, unlucky votary of lansquenet and *rouge-et-noir*. The friend who wrote to her, added, that, as yet, Sir Edward had not been enticed into risking any very considerable sums, but that everything was to be feared from the ardour with which he followed the fluctuations of fate upon the *tapis vert*.

Lady Vernon was sitting close to a half-opened window, and—what often happened to her now—doing nothing. She had neither book nor work upon her knee, and her fingers listlessly pulled, one after the other, the delicate pink leaves of an expanding rose-bud which hung down over the side of the jardinière near her. Madame La Duchesse de Montévreux was announced. It was an early hour (not yet twelve o'clock) for a Parisian lady to pay a visit.

Lady Vernon grew rather more sick at heart than before.

"You expected me," said the Duchess in a tone of grave kindness, as she kissed Lady Vernon on the forehead.

Mildred did not say—"I dreaded you," but that was the answer she suppressed, as, rising, she silently stretched forth her hand to Gaston's mother.

The Duchess took it, and, as she seated herself upon a sofa, on which Mildred took a seat beside her, she did not allow it to escape from her grasp. Madame de Montévreux was a very firm person—what is called a woman of strong mind,—but she also was a very kind woman, and as warm-hearted as a French-woman of her irreproachable birth and position could be allowed to be. She looked at Mildred with real interest, and, before she attempted to speak to her, pressed the hand she still held in her own with affectionate, and Mildred knew with sincere, regard. Lady Vernon's anxious

heart stopped beating. Poor heart! it felt it was about to hear its death warrant, and listened breathlessly for the fatal sentence.

"Lady Vernon," began Madame de Montévreux, "I have a great deal to say to you; you have guessed that already. I might begin by making protestations of my tender interest in everything which concerns you; but I will not. I will put to you one only question: do you believe me capable, even for the greatest possible advantage to myself, or those near to me, of representing things otherwise than as they are? of exaggerating or colouring, in the slightest degree, a fact, of no matter what kind?"

"I do *not*," replied Lady Vernon, decidedly.

"Do you believe," continued the Duchess, in a softer tone, "do you believe that the regard I have professed for you is sincere?—that I have for you a *real* affection?"

Mildred reflected for an instant, and then, raising her lovely eyes to the Duchess's face, and fixing all their truthfulness upon her:

"I *do*," she said, with gentle firmness.

"My child," re-commenced Madame de Montévreux, "I have always thought that people were principally offended at the interference of others in their affairs, because they were not *assured* of the sympathy of the interferer; but it seems to me that the natives even of your country, who pass for the most reserved and least tolerant of indiscretion, would—if quite certain that what at first may appear like an impertinence, was produced by the feeling diametrically opposed to it, consent to hear, without anger, that there is some one who is as well informed as they themselves, upon what they have thought confined to their own breast."

The Duchess paused. Mildred blushed deeply, and made a sort of involuntary attempt to withdraw her hand.

"Nay," said Madame de Montévreux, repossessing herself of her friend's hand, "I will not pain you; I will not speak of anything that can hurt or annoy you. If I approached too near to a delicate subject, it was with the intention of letting you feel perfectly, that, if

your secret was known, your conduct was so, too, and that if grief has been caused by the one, nothing could surpass the tribute of admiration paid to the other; but, if any allusion of this kind displeases you, I will adopt a different manner, and tell you frankly and at once, that I have come to beg of you, to implore, the greatest service one human being can render to another: I have come to entreat of you to save Gaston's honour."

Mildred started and turned pale. "What can have happened?" she exclaimed. "*His* honour! Oh, Duchess!" she added, with a look of confidence in him she loved, "you must be mistaken; his honour can never be in danger!"

"Dear, sweet child!" replied Madame de Montévreux; "how worthy you are of him! And had you *both* been free, how—"

The blood rushed scarlet to Mildred's temples. "You spoke of M. de Montévreux's honour," she said, hurriedly interrupting the Duchess; "what can threaten that?"

"You!"

Lady Vernon sprang from her seat at the unexpected reply. "I!" she cried, looking as though she thought it impossible she could have heard aright. "I?"

"Alas!" replied Madame de Montévreux, gently, "if you were not alone the cause of the evil, do you think I would apply to you so unceremoniously for the remedy? And if I did not respect you as profoundly as I do, do you think I should wish to associate you with myself in the task of saving my son? Sit down, dearest Lady Vernon, and let me tell you how your aid is required."

Mildred did as the Duchess requested, and prepared to hear the explanation of the words which had so surprised her.

In as concise a way as she could, Madame de Montévreux told her friend of what had happened to the La Roche Bermonts, and how it had happened through Gaston's fault. Mildred listened attentively to the Duchess's narration, growing paler and paler at every word.

"And now," said Madame de Montévreux, "you see the position. Gaston, affianced since the death of the Prince de La Roche Bermont to his cousin, was always tacitly supposed by the Princess to have had a secret affection for her daughter's magnificent marriage portion. This I *know*, though I affect never to have perceived it. Suddenly, Olympe becomes comparatively penniless; and then the Duc de Montévreux all at once discovers that he cannot accept Mademoiselle de La Roche Bermont as a wife. Oh! Lady Vernon, how will *he*—how will *you* feel when these things are said, and cannot be denied?"

Mildred raised her head with an ill-affected attempt at indifference. "Surely," said she, "M. le Duc de Montévreux is of an age to know what he ought to do in such circumstances? I cannot see of what use I can be, or how my influence in an affair which must be entirely indifferent to me—"

"Lady Vernon," remarked gravely the

Duchess, "remember that Gaston is ignorant of the step I have taken;—remember," she pursued in a still graver tone—"that I told you I came to ask of you the greatest service one human being could render to another—I did not ask you to be passive, I begged, I implored of you to aid me actively—for nothing less than active aid can save us. I think, Lady Vernon," she added in a very serious tone. "I think you have mistaken me, but I hope I have not mistaken you."

Lady Vernon remained silent. The Duchess continued:—"If you are not all that I imagined you, I will never again trust my own judgment and I shall decidedly, then, have taken a false step; but if you are what I have supposed, you will yet understand me, and feel that the appeal I now make to you can only be made to a woman immeasurably superior in every virtue to the rest of her sex, by a woman intensely convinced of that fact. But what have I to fear?" said Madame de Montévreux, suddenly interrupting her own phrase. "If you were less

great, less admirable than I supposed you, would Gaston be ready to sacrifice everything, even his honour, for your sake?"

This last hit told. Lady Vernon raised her eyes and looked enquiringly at the Duchess. She read in Madame de Montévreux's countenance such sincerity of sympathy that she was in an instant disarmed. The Duchess felt this—holding out her arms to Mildred—

"Do you still feel disposed," she said, with a smile no one could mistake or withstand, "to resent what I have done?" Lady Vernon did not answer, but she hid her blushing cheek upon Madame de Montévreux's shoulder. The Duchess felt the tumultuous beating of her heart, and, passing her arm round Mildred's waist:

"Poor, poor child!" she murmured, tenderly, "I dreaded the pain I must give you; and, if any means had existed of sparing it to you, believe me, I would have adopted them; not only for your sake, but for *his*." The Duchess felt the quiver which shook Lady Vernon's

frame at the allusion, and went on. "Poor, poor Gaston!" she said, fondly stroking Mildred's hair with her hand; "he will be so miserable! so wretched! His affection for you is so profound!—he so venerates, so respects you!—he so blindly, too, persists in dreaming that he can escape from what is, alas! inevitable —that the shock will be dreadful!"

Madame de Montévreux perceived that her neck was wet with Lady Vernon's uncontrollable and silent tears. Imprinting a kiss upon her fair brow, "Weep, my poor sufferer!" she cried, twining her arms round Mildred, and drawing her into a still closer embrace; "weep, and I will weep with you, for my very heart is wrung at being forced to demand from you this cruel sacrifice."

When both were sufficiently calm: "Will you dictate to me," asked Lady Vernon in a trembling voice, "what you think I ought to do?"

"No, indeed, my child!" replied the Duchess, yours be the honour, yours the work, and yours

the glory! When I determined to apply to you as to my last hope, I knew that I had to do with no ordinary person. You love Gaston as much as I do, and you will, I am sure, devise the proper way by which to force him into being worthy of yourself and of the name he bears."

Now that her proud reserve had been conquered, now that—her secret avowed—she yet perceived that she stood honoured as before, Mildred felt some consolation in talking of Gaston, to Gaston's mother. She turned the dagger round and round in the wound, it is true, but she attained to that sort of feverish, unnatural excitement which is often produced by an excess of pain or anguish. The Duchess, who was remarkably quick-sighted and penetrating, even for one of her country-women, easily guessed the state of poor Mildred's mind, and encouraged it.

"I will not speak to you of your own reputation," said she to Lady Vernon, "because I would not that the idea of an evil averted

from yourself, should diminish in the least degree the merit of your sublime devotion to another."

"But you surely do not think," rejoined her friend, "that any one would have ventured to utter a word, or harbour a thought, derogatory to my good name?"

"Dearest Lady Vernon!" answered Madame de Montévreux, "you are justified in supposing this, up to a certain point, because, however people may calumniate the world—it does generally both punish and reward with singular justice; but then, what is called the world—society, to be just, must be left to itself; it is only impartial if independent; but nothing is more easy than to lead the world on to condemn, if any influential person or party have an interest in so doing. In this case, were Gaston to refuse to marry his cousin Olympe, the la Roche Bermonts would not be content with throwing the odium of the most ignoble sordidness upon Gaston's name; they would drag yours before the public,

and the whole of the ultra-legitimist party, incensed at Gaston's political defection, joining with them, you would be irretrievably lost."

"Are you certain of this?—quite certain?" asked Mildred, with singular earnestness.

"Perfectly so."

"And Gaston?—is he aware of it also?"

"So thoroughly," answered Madame de Montévreux, "that he would, long ago, while Olympe was still in the enjoyment of her splendid fortune, have broken off the marriage, had it not been for this consideration."

Mildred raised her tearful eyes thankfully to Heaven, and, pressing the Duchess's hand,

"Then," murmured she, "I will answer for the whole,"—and a few moments after, in a voice she could not, spite of all her efforts, render firm, "When do you wish that . . . ." (she could not proceed) . . . . that it should take place?" she added, in a scarcely audible tone.

"Why, as things now are," replied Madame de Montévreux, "the sooner it takes place the

better for him; for, if not in pity to the innocent creature who is to bear his name, in duty and in justice to himself, he ought not to be supposed to have hesitated one second in the face of so complete a ruin of worldly hopes...."

"For me," said Mildred, "the sooner it takes place the better;" her voice faltered dreadfully at this phrase; but, with a quivering lip that almost refused to syllable her words, she pursued: "The sooner the irrevocable barrier is raised, that is to shut out my thoughts from wandering around him, the better. I shall be more tranquil. I shall be quite resigned—quite happy—when all is ov—" she could not finish the sentence, but burying her face in her handkerchief, wept convulsively.

Madame de Montévreux embraced her again, and called her by every name a mother's affection could devise.

"Oh! Mildred! dear Mildred!" cried she—"let me, too, give you that name;—as I have already said, had *you* but been free when Gaston

and you first met, I myself would have aided him to break the chain that bound him, and—"

"Hush!" exclaimed Mildred; "not a word more, I conjure you—I *dare* not listen to you!" and wiping away all trace of tears, she disengaged herself from the Duchess's arm, and, proudly raising her head, walked with a hurried but firm step across the room. Coming back again to the spot where Madame de Montévreux stood, as though she was now sufficiently sure of her strength,

"It was but a moment," said she; "and now I will be firm. I am shocked, ashamed at my weakness; but it is passed. You do not know," she pursued, mournfully, but in a steady voice, "what my love for Gaston was: you do not know how pure, how holy, how devoid of all selfishness! I dreamed that, through the thorny paths of my now solitary existence, Gaston's arm would support me; I thought that Gaston, with a brother's love, would watch over and console me; but it might not be: it

was wrong—it was unlawful, and I have been punished. Still," she added, shaking her head despondingly, "I asked for so little! my wishes were so humble! Surely in this life the pure, holy affection a sister might accept was not too much!"

"Dearest Mildred," resumed the Duchess, "if I had not known your love for Gaston to have been the very essence of all that is purest, sublimest upon earth, I should not have dared ask of you, even to save him, such a sacrifice."

"You are right," cried Lady Vernon, her eyes sparkling with generous enthusiasm; "his honour is at stake, and *must* be saved. Yes, Gaston," she continued, in a tone of tender exaltation, "we must both bend to what we love even better than one another—*our duty*; and, in years to come, when the memory of the past shall have ceased to pain, you shall acknowledge that Mildred Vernon was worthy, by the sacrifice she made for you, of the deep and pure devotion you consecrated to her in your heart, and which

she had the courage to renounce for ever! And now," she added, hastily embracing the Duchess, "leave me, dearest friend; I must be alone. I have much to think of."

As the Duchess tenderly returned her embrace, Lady Vernon's mind had had time to be traversed by a thought—a last shadow of lingering weakness. Lifting up the lace that bordered the little collar worn by Madame de Montévreux, and seemingly occupied in examining it,

"Do you think *she* loves him?" Mildred enquired, in what some people might have called a careless tone.

Madame de Montévreux felt the hidden importance of this question, and shaped her answer accordingly.

"She scarcely even knows him," she replied, evasively, and the reply seemed to comfort Mildred.

"Rely upon me," she said, solemnly, as, with a fervent pressure of the hand, she bade the Duchess adieu.

When Mildred was alone, the excitement still lasted. She walked up and down the room; she could not sit still. Her hand wandered from her brow to her heart: both throbbed violently. She would not cry, and yet her throat swelled with unwept tears. She thought how wretched Gaston would be; and then, how very generously she was acting; and how fine a thing, and how consolatory it was to have *done right;* and then a tear stole down her cheek; she dashed it away; then another came, and her hand trembled as she dried it; then she thought how she should be rewarded for all this; and then—she gave way, and, burying her head in the sofa-cushions, sobbed as though her heart would break.

CHAPTER XIV.

Lady Vernon gave positive orders for the total exclusion of every visitor, and remained alone with her own sad communings, free even from the expectation of Mr. Danvers's possible presence. The excitement still lasted, and she was in all the fervour of generous enthusiasm when she planned and wrote a letter to M. de Montévreux, such as neither he, nor any man living, could have resisted.

As she was writing it, there was a ring at the bell, and the pen dropped from her hand. She rose, retreated to her own room, and listened—her orders were obeyed—no one entered—and, as a cabriolet drove away from the door, the sound of whose wheels were familiar to her ear,

she did *not* go to the window to take a last furtive glance at Gaston.

When she re-entered the salon, Monsieur de Montévreux's card lay upon the table, close to the half-written letter, which, in her haste she had forgotten to carry with her. *His card!* How little had he suspected that she whom he loved, was there, watching for his receding steps! and writing to him to tell him that they must never meet more!

The letter was finished—sealed—and Mildred felt in her heart that he would obey its dictates. She knew it would be decisive, for it seemed ungenerous; and, by basing the prayer it expressed upon apparently selfish motives, placed him in the alternative of either immediately acquiescing, or seeming to treat lightly what so nearly touched the woman he loved.

Mildred's heart bled as she re-perused the epistle, and thought how selfish she must appear in Gaston's eyes. Yet she felt it was the only way to act, and a voice she did not even try to hush, whispered that Gaston's heart would not

allow itself to be thus deceived, and that, whilst seeming to yield to her advantage, selfishly argued, he would, in fact, be vanquished by her generosity.

Mildred resolved to send the letter late in the evening, for she knew, well enough, that the first answer would be a visit from the Duke, and a vain attempt to prove to her that the contemplated sacrifice might be evaded. She determined, therefore, first, that the night should be given him for reflection, and next, that she *would* not receive him, or admit of any discussion.

When the right—the incontestible right—is pointed out to a well-principled mind, it is comparatively easy to adhere to it, and Mildred had now had pointed out to her the path along which she was to guide her steps, and, however trembling they might be, she was resolved to go on or die.

Before retiring to rest, and when she knew that the fatal blow was struck—that the letter was actually *in* Monsieur de Montévreux's hands,

she prayed long and fervently; and this humble and sincere appeal to the Omnipotent Father of all tender mercies, had its never-failing effect. Lady Vernon arose from prayer calmed and comforted.

Towards morning, she sank to sleep, and slept late. The awakening was the worst of anything she had yet undergone. The mental excitement of the preceding day had vanished, and the nerves and physical energies, relaxed by recent slumber, had no power of re-action against the grief which oppressed them. Mildred had now to struggle against all the thousand little painful details of her sacrifice, of which she had not thought, and which met her at every turn. As she rose from her couch, a series of what one would call the most absurd little annoyances (if they were not so acutely painful) assailed her.

She wondered whether Gaston's wife would ever sing Schubert's ballads to her husband—whether, if she stood in the moonlight, he would think of the evening when the moon shone

upon *her* in the garden at Montmorency. She was beginning to feel the reality of that which she had hitherto considered in the abstract; in a word, her sacrifice was *coming home to her.*

Every ray of the sun, stealing through the window-blinds, every hue of colour upon the carpet, every wind that passed over the flowers in the balcony, every door that was shut, every chair that was stirred—all, every thing, recalled to her that which she had sworn to renounce.

For form's sake, she seated herself, as usual, at the breakfast-table, but at an hour, for her, unusually late. A letter was brought to her—she knew the hand too well! and the servant, in delivering it, said that "Monsieur le Duc" had already called twice that morning, and the second time had left that letter, saying he *must* see her Ladyship, as it was a question of important and urgent business.

"I am aware of it," said Lady Vernon, calmly, to the man—"but if Monsieur de Montévreux calls again, tell him I will write

to him upon the subject, but am not well enough to see any one—and you will deny me at the same time to *every* one—even to Mr. Danvers and Lady Augusta."

This was said, purposely, in so easy a tone, that, even had the domestics thought these suddenly unadmitted visits of Monsieur de Montévreux, and such a quick interchange of letters, strange, their mistress's manner would have destroyed all suspicion.

Lady Vernon looked anxiously at the letter in her hand. Through the sealed envelope, it had no secrets for her. She read its contents with the *clairvoyance* of a somnambulist, and the agitated hand that had traced the characters of the address had not uttered, in his last distracted appeal to her heart, one single reproach that was not present to her at once.

She looked long at the missive; undecided whether or not to open it—but the *right* prevailed, as it was sure to do, since it had been so plainly pointed out to her. She approached her writing-table, took a sheet of paper from her

blotting-book (and all this was done slowly and collectedly), and, having carefully wrapped up the letter in its folds, introduced the whole into an envelope, into which she also slipped a note, containing only these words :—

"I return to you, unopened, the letter I have just received—I know what it *must* contain. But all efforts to escape from our destiny are useless now—that which must be, *must* be; and all I entreat, is that, if you have still in your heart any regard for me, you will prove it by the extent of your courage, and the firmness of your decision.—I will neither see you, nor receive a letter from you, until I know that *the day* is irrevocably fixed—and then, if you wish it, we will meet once more, to bid one another an eternal adieu."

This letter was also despatched, and Lady Vernon thought that, for the moment at least, her trials were over. She little knew what fate had yet in store for her!

But, in the meanwhile, how had Gaston

received the first announcement of Lady Vernon's resolve, and of the sacrifice she expected from him? Mildred had, in the letter, avoided mentioning the Duchess's name, and had spoken of the necessity which existed for his marriage with his cousin, as of a circumstance which had come to her knowledge in the world, through the medium of society.

Gaston, with that instinct which fails to no created being—whether man or brute, when attacked—had instantaneously felt that his mother was, in some way, which he could not discover, the authoress of all this; but two things prevented him from taxing her with it: first, that Lady Vernon did not so much as hint at her, and next, that his conscience ruthlessly told him she was right.

Gaston's grief was, like most other human sentiments, mixed up with a variety of other feelings; with anger, disappointment, and a violent determination to resist. He looked upon it as an utter impossibility—that, with

his whole soul intent upon another, he should lead Olympe to the altar.

But, if he did not—what would ensue? ruin to Mildred—that was inevitable—and then he re-read the letter. That argument was unanswerable—and she had taken good care to employ it.—Selfish!—But would nothing, then, would no harm accrue to himself from this voluntary desertion, under misfortune, of the bride with whom, in prosperity, he had not (out of consideration for Mildred's fame, which he knew must perish in his attempt) dared to break?

Did nothing threaten *him?* Yes! the worst of all—dishonour—and, to all appearances, a well-deserved reputation of ignoble avarice. Marrying Olympe, his happiness was trodden under foot;—refusing to do so, Lady Vernon's name was sullied, and he himself was false to every tradition of his race. The gentleness of his blood was belied, and he would have behaved towards a child of his father's sister, as one of those whose vile trade it is to traffic only in gold

would, perhaps, scarcely behave towards his affianced wife!

Necessity began to enwrap Gaston on all sides—and the Inevitable, little by little casting off the veils which hid it from view, stood, in all its hideous nakedness, imperiously before him.

His first step, on sallying forth on the morning after he had received Mildred's letter, was to go to Lady Vernon's himself. His head had sought no pillow that night, and it was with all the irritation of bodily fatigue, added to the deadly weight of mental anguish, that M. de Montrévreux sought to see Mildred, and induce her to change her purpose.

He did not succeed, as we have seen, and had he done so, what would have been the result? He acknowledged, in the secret recesses of his heart, that his doom was sealed; and he was not prepared, either for his own sake, or for Mildred's, to meet or accept the consequences attendant upon a plan of conduct opposed to that which Lady Vernon had marked out. But,

like all human creatures, he blindly sought to prolong the struggle, and vaguely dreamed of some impossible way of eluding that which he knew to be inevitable in the end.

Upon the receipt of Lady Vernon's second letter, however, enclosing his own unopened one, he felt that all was over—and then, in despair, he sought comfort in the counsels, in the unfailing affection of his mother.

She had waited for him, for she knew he *must* come to her; and now, began that portion of her part which was the most congenial to her kind nature. Without admitting any discussion upon the fact itself, she accepted it as accomplished, and divided her discourse between praises of Lady Vernon, and strenuous endeavours to console him to whom Mildred was now for ever lost.

This plan succeeded; Gaston talked freely of Mildred, of his pure and ardent love for her, and of the hope he had nurtured that, free from every other tie, he might have been permitted to consecrate to her the holy aspirations of his heart.

The mother and son spoke long together, and when Gaston rose and pressed a parting kiss upon Madame de Montévreux's soft hand, it was with a tacit agreement that the event which was to unite in one the houses of La Roche Bermont and Montévreux, was to take place as soon as it could possibly be arranged.

Mildred had been led to the immolation of all her heart's hopes, by a sense of right, and an enthusiastic desire to be worthy of him she loved. Gaston yielded, man-like, to the practical impossibilities which lay in the way of his refusal of Mademoiselle de La Roche Bermont's hand; and both were equally true to each other, and to their sex.

Matters were settled in a very few days, and the long talked-of marriage between M. de Montévreux and his fair cousin was announced to the members of the family, and its old friends, for the fourth of June. Gaston, under the shelter of his political occupations, escaped from the more active duties of an *empressé*

courtship, to which he at once told the Duchess he was positively inadequate.

She supplied the place of her son; and the preparations and purchases required for the *trousseau* and *corbeille* prevented the coldness and absence of the bridegroom from being remarked. Half the world expatiated on M. de Montévreux's generous conduct, and the other half said, it was not astonishing, and only what was to be expected from him considering the name he bore.

Mildred and Gaston met once more, as she had promised, when *the day* was fixed. Their meeting was mournful, as are all these sad adieux to the poetry of existence; but both came from it fortified, and seriously resolved to accept and discharge fittingly, the weary duties and rules of life's prose.

Gaston unfortunately knew that not even grief is eternal; and, whilst shedding tears of real bitterness over the bright dream that was no more, he despised himself for feeling that the

day would come when he should think with tranquillity and calmness upon that hour—certainly the most wretched of his life; and which, had he known life's secrets less profoundly, would have driven him for relief to the trigger of a pistol, or the nearest bridge over the Seine.

Mildred was spared this soul-deflowering conviction. She firmly believed that, in renouncing Gaston's love, she had renounced life, and that, if positive physical death did not actually follow the sacrifice, the death of her happiness, the cessation of her mental life, was decreed.

Day followed day; and Mildred, as much as possible avoided the contact of the world. Madame de Montévreux came constantly to see her. Their talk was almost always of the future, never of the past; and Lady Vernon listened to Madame de Montévreux's plans with the gentle resignation of a dying woman, who will not damp the spirits of those around her whilst they are forming projects based upon the recovery of

her who feels within her that she can never more recover.

The second day of June had come. Two days more, and Gaston was to be the husband of Mademoiselle de la Roche Bermont. Mildred felt, more than she allowed herself to believe, consoled by the conviction that Olympe could not know enough of her cousin to be attached to him as yet. The ordinary run of women are anxious to know whether their rival is beloved; the reverse is the case with women of a more refined stamp; and poor Mildred's question of "does *she* love *him?*" is by far the more natural one. They who really love profoundly and *purely*, are so well aware that love attracts love, and that to her who feels a real passion is lent an irresistable fascination, an almost divine grace, that they fear to the full as much the affection felt *by* as that felt *for* a rival.

Upon this score, therefore, Mildred was unconsciously and involuntarily at ease, and she even made sincere vows and wishes for Gaston's

happiness, and tried already to love his wife. But all was not yet over, and the most exquisite torture of any she had yet suffered awaited her still. On the morning of the second of June, a letter reached her from Baden-Baden, announcing Sir Edward Vernon's death! It was from the friend who had written to her before, and contained the following passage:

"I thought it was right you should be informed of this event immediately; but it is judged advisable to keep it a profound secret from the rest of the world, for a few days at least: and, therefore, let me entreat of you to appear to learn it at the moment when it is officially announced. He came by his death in a midnight brawl at a gaming-table of the lowest description, and was carried home apparently only stunned, but in fact dead.

"From having been constantly on the watch, we were enabled to elude the researches of the public authorities, and, two or three days hence, a 'sudden death from apoplexy' will be a story that, finding its probability

in the excesses of the life he led latterly, will save his memory from ignominy.

"Luckily," added the writer of the letter, "in this country the authorities are always ready to aid in any fiction that preserves the honour of private families; and so many are implicated in this last horrid affair, that I think we might be safe at all events. Still, silence for the moment is the safest of all measures; and in a couple of days all will be right."

The letter dropped from Mildred's hands. She was free! Sir Edward had behaved too unworthily for her, in the depths of her own conscience, to feel any regret for his loss; and the manner of his death only served as a further proof that the honour of his name, which she also bore, could scarcely be deemed secure during the continuance of his mis-spent, misguided life. The whole current of her thoughts, therefore, flowed into another channel.

Madame de Montévreux's words rushed back upon her memory. "Had you been free!" and

she *was* free—and Gaston—was, in two days, to be the husband of another! But now, could this marriage take place? Did the same arguments in favour of it exist, which existed but a few short hours before?

Mildred's brain was on fire. She formed project after project, wilder one than the other. A word—one word only—to Gaston, she knew would be enough; and his secrecy was that of the grave. How many marriages, even in France, had been broken off at the foot of the altar? And she thought over all she had ever heard upon this head, till there seemed to her disordered vision but one impossibility in the world: that of Gaston de Montévreux's calling any other woman 'wife.'

But what was to be done? Though Gaston would now be sufficiently exonerated from the reproach of sordidness, would that restore her position to Mademoiselle de la Roche Bermont? Might not Gaston make over to his cousin all his wealth? Might not . . . . In short, the wild

fantasies that chased one another in her brain are not to be enumerated or described.

But of whom to ask advice in this emergency? She was forbidden to open her lips; and it was a subject too delicate upon which to consult any friend she knew. Her thoughts, all at once, reverted to the Abbé de Nangis. Yes, to him she would apply. He would guide her, would tell her that which *ought* to be done, and his sacred character alone warranted such a confidence. She hastily put on her walking-attire, and, sending for a hackney-coach, stepped into it, and ordered the coachman to drive to St.——, the *Curé's* parish church.

It was Sunday; and Lady Vernon knew nothing of the hours and regulations of the catholic sabbath; but she hoped to find M. de Nangis either before or after high mass. Arrived at the presbytery annexed to the church, she rang at the door of the Abbé's modest apartment, and was told by the servant who answered the summons, that M. le Curé could not receive, as in little more than half an hour he was to

celebrate mass, and could not be disturbed at such a moment.

Lady Vernon insisted, and at length obtained from the servant that he would tell M. de Nangis that a friend of *Madame Fournier's* wished to see him on urgent business. A moment later, Mildred was admitted into the *Curé's* presence. Her deadly paleness, and the wildly-anxious expression of her eye arrested his attention, and he advanced towards her with visible interest.

When Lady Vernon saw herself so near what she had desired, she shrunk from the confidence she had to make.

"M. l'Abbé," she faltered, "I do not know—I scarcely dare—" and, unable to proceed, she held forth to him with a trembling hand the letter she had just received, and, sinking into a chair, buried her face in her hands. The calm, grave tones of the *Curé* aroused her:

"Look up, my daughter," he said, kindly. "This is indeed a hard trial which our Divine Father has thought fit to impose upon you; but

which, with His help, you will, I trust, surmount."

"You know then *all?*" whispered Lady Vernon, almost inaudibly.

"My poor child," replied the Abbé, "I have known *all* much longer than you suppose; and have more than once tried, by indirect means, and even advice, to aid you, for I saw how really virtuous was your heart; but His designs were doubtless that you should drain the cup to the dregs; and in all things His will alone be done!"

"Then," said Mildred, as the tears of her last crushed hopes stole down her wan cheeks, "you condemn me to—"

"To silence and resignation," rejoined the Abbé, in a firm tone. Mildred bent her head upon her breast.

"My poor suffering friend," said M. de Nangis; "for you will permit me to call you thus—these sacrifices are pleasant to the Lord, for they are fruitful, and elevate the mind. All those who suffer, but above all, those who

renounce, are dear to him, and will not only be rewarded hereafter, but, believe me, will meet their reward even in this life, in the sweet peacefulness and holy calm that will descend upon their spirit. Do not think," pursued M. de Nangis, "that I have not been perfectly impartial throughout this whole affair. I assure you that, although of another faith than mine, had you both been free, I should have hailed with deep delight the day that should have bound you in wedlock to M. de Montévreux, for I know you to be really worthy of him, and likely to have fostered all the high principles of which the germ lies within him. But it has pleased Heaven that it should be otherwise; and resignation is the only resource left to those who suffer—"

"But, my father," cried Mildred, in her anguish; "for so I must call you—this is too much! Till now, I was resigned; but since I saw the chance, the hope—oh! indeed I suffer too much!"

"Too much!" exclaimed the Abbé, in an

almost indignant tone. "Look upon that, and learn to be humble about your sufferings as about every thing else;" and as M. de Nangis directed Lady Vernon's eyes towards a crucifix which hung opposite to her, his lofty gestures, his whole attitude, assumed an air of almost more than mortal dignity. "My child," he resumed, in a milder tone, "think of the divine agonies of Him who died to save us! Think of the exquisite anguish, the sickness unto death, which drew from him that cry: 'My father! my father! *if such be thy will*, turn from me this bitter cup!' and blush that you should have called any mortal pangs *too much*. Have faith! have reliance upon His all-merciful omnipotence. He will not impose upon you more than with *good will* you can support. Exert that good-will, my daughter," continued M. de Nangis: "but this one sacrifice more, and you will indeed have done your duty as a Christian."

Mildred raised her languid head, and looking earnestly at the *Curé*, "you think then that it

is *right* to allow this marriage to take place, even though, perhaps, but a few hours after, *he* may discover that it was not indispensable?"

"I do," rejoined gravely M. de Nangis. "In the first place, because the moral indispensability of it remains, in my conviction, as before; and next, because it is for the happiness of the *two* wedded persons."

"Can you think *he* will ever be happy?" asked Lady Vernon, in a trembling voice.

"I am *sure* he will," answered M. de Nangis, slowly, and in a tone at once firm and kind.

This last blow was enough. Mildred bowed her head humbly, and, as the uncontrollable tears forced their way through the slender fingers of her clasped hands, she slid gently down from the chair whereon she sat, and sank upon her knees.

"Have courage, my daughter!" said M. de Nangis. "The Almighty will take compassion on you; pray to him, and I also will pray to him for you."

When Lady Vernon rose to depart, it was

time for the Abbé to descend to his duties in the church.

"If I might—if it were not wrong," she murmured, "I could wish to be present at mass."

"Lady Vernon," replied M. de Nangis, "my faith is not yours, but your God is mine; it can never be wrong to enter a temple where his worship is being celebrated with fervent and humble piety;" and so saying, the *Curé* led the way, through the sacristy, into the church.

The edifice was a very ancient, but a very poor one, and there was little of gorgeousness, or of the wondrous productions of art, to attract the eye. The music, however, was good, and the choristers' voices pure. But what most impressed Mildred was the appearance of the Abbé de Nangis. Majestic and humble, at the same time, you felt that, regarding himself as the lowliest of mortals, he was proud of being the last of *His* servants whom he adored.

Over the high, noble brow, there shone a holy serenity; from the firm yet benevolent lips, the divine word fell consolatory; and, as Lady

Vernon beheld him in the exercise of his sacred functions, she inwardly felt that the counsels of such a being *had* a character distinct from that of those any one else *could* give; that he *must* be listened to, and *obeyed.*

The thought that M. de Nangis would pray for her, comforted her more than she could have believed possible. Kneeling down, and bowing her head almost to the ground, she joined mentally in the words of the *Agnus Dei*, and to the Eternally Divine Lamb of God exclaimed, in accents wherein sincere good will mingled with humble hope, "Take pity on us—*Dona nobis pacem!*"

CHAPTER XV.

When Lady Vernon compared the date of the day on which the letter from Baden-Baden was written, with that on which she had received it, she was terrified to find that it had, from some cause or other, lingered two days on the road, and was, consequently, that much behind-hand in its delivery.

On the fourth of June, therefore, four whole days would have elapsed, instead of only two (as she had calculated), since the fatal event had taken place. Sir Edward's death was probably already made known upon the spot, and might, from hour to hour, be announced in the English papers.

As Mildred was now thoroughly convinced that her freedom could be of no avail to her, she felt that the thing most to be desired was that M. de Montévreux should remain ignorant of the fact of Sir Edward's death to the last, in order to avoid the explosion of vain regret, which she knew would ensue, and which *must* be controlled, should the news reach him when it was too late.

M. de Nangis came to her on the eve of the fatal day, and they consulted long and earnestly on what was really best for the peace of all parties. The *Curé's* advice to her was as follows:—

"Devote yourself in silence and seclusion to the serious thoughts and pre-occupations, the widowhood, of which you alone are aware, must inspire; but let no outward act, word, or look, betray a premature knowledge of the awful event;—you owe this to M. de Montévreux, to his mother, to your own sacrifice."

As it was not probable that either Gaston or the Duchess would request Lady Vernon's

presence at the nuptial ceremony, it was agreed, that she might easily dispense with this, and thus contrive to remain at home, without exciting suspicion, and consecrate herself to the solemn meditations befitting one whose partner in life, however erring, has been suddenly called to his last dread account.

The Abbé was preparing to take his leave, when the folding doors of the *salon* were thrown open, and Madame La Princesse de La Roche Bermont was announced.

Lady Vernon turned pale, and, rising from her chair, had not presence of mind sufficient to advance towards her unexpected visitors—for the Princess was not alone—her daughter accompanied her.

Olympe, however, spared her any continued suspense, for, approaching her with all the winning fondness, all the innocent confidence of so young a girl,

"Lady Vernon," she said, in her sweet, fresh voice, "will you not forgive our intrusion? I forced mamma, who stood upon all sorts of

ceremonies, to come; I told her I was sure you would not be annoyed at our unannounced visit—nay more—" and the gentle creature looked at her with that irresistible, coaxing air, the last vestige of the nursery, so soon to be laid aside by the *woman*—" nay, more, I said, I was certain you would, on the contrary, be grieved if we did not act *sans facons* with you—and so you see, I have persuaded her!"

Madame de La Roche Bermont began to make some rather pompous excuses, which Mildred had now sufficiently recovered herself to receive as she ought. To say the truth, the Princess, since M. de Montévreux had come forward so magnanimously in regard to his union with his cousin, but more especially since Lady Vernon had saved her daughter from a great danger, had relaxed considerably in her stiff demeanour towards the young Englishwoman, and had even gone so far as to admit that had Mildred had the good fortune to be born in the Faubourg St. Germain, instead of in a semi-barbarous land, she really would have

been very near being a charming—nay, an almost irreproachable person.

As to Olympe, she had felt towards the rival of whom she entertained no suspicion, an irresistible attraction, which did not always admit of her observing the strict rules of etiquette in regard to Lady Vernon.

The adventure in the Champs Elysées, and the gratitude inspired by Mildred's prompt assistance, had appeared to Olympe herself as the motive for this feeling; but, in fact, it sprung from one of those mysterious decrees of Providence, which sometimes ordain that two beings shall be united in heart, of whom, a secret sentiment for the same object, if known to both, must have made irreconcilable enemies.

Mademoiselle de La Roche Bermont looked up to Lady Vernon with that kind of tender respect girls often have for a married woman, but a very few years older than themselves.

When her mother had terminated her apologies, and the party were seated, (M. de

Nangis remained, from a wish to support and aid Lady Vernon), Olympe rose from her chair, and, advancing towards Mildred, gracefully dropped upon one knee on the cushion at her feet. She was, evidently, going to speak seriously—or half so at least —when her attention was caught by the pretty playthings suspended to Mildred's *châtelaine*. Stretching forth her little hand, and, for the moment, diverted from her purpose, she examined the curious baubles.

"How lovely!" she exclaimed: "where did you get such dear old things? Oh! here is one that is indeed beautiful!" and she lifted up a trinket that was, truly enough, a very rare and precious one. It was a heart formed of "one entire and perfect," not "chrysolite," but opal, of considerable size, and the colours of which were singularly brilliant.

"Yes;" said Mildred, "that *is*, indeed, a curious gem. It was brought from the Holy Land, many centuries ago, by an ancestor of my mother's—"

"In the *first* crusade?" interrupted the Princess—her esteem for Mildred augmenting considerably.

"Indeed, I know not?" she replied, "but I rather fear, on the contrary, in the *last*. It was the present, I believe, of a fair infidel, and possesses, I fancy, many virtues in Moslem eyes—it is a talisman—"

"How delightful!" exclaimed Olympe.

Lady Vernon detached the precious toy from her *châtelaine*, and, taking in her hand Mademoiselle de La Roche Bermont's watch chain—

"Wear it for my sake," she said, with a sudden impulse. The Princess exclaimed against such magnificence—Olympe resisted; but, with gentle force, Mildred fastened the jewelled heart to the girl's chain, saying at the same time, with a strange smile:

"You know not how meet a gift it is for a bride; it preserves from jealousy—"

Olympe laughed; "I shall not need that, I hope," she replied, and, as she bent forward to embrace Lady Vernon, "I came to ask of you

something *very*, *very* serious," she added; "and you must promise—you must, indeed—I will not rise from here till you have done so;" and she took Lady Vernon's hands in hers.

"What is there, I *can* do?" demanded Mildred—and, in a graver tone—"there are few things, believe me, which I am not capable of accomplishing for your happiness."

"Will you promise to come with my aunt *to-morrow*?" whispered the guileless creature, throwing her arms round Mildred's neck, and drawing down her face almost to the level of her own.

Lady Vernon turned so pale, that, had not the room, luckily, been darkened against the sun, her sudden change of countenance must have been visible. She imprinted a kiss—such a kiss as a sister might have bestowed, on the soft, bright, up-turned cheek of her innocent rival, and hesitated.

"Do not refuse me!" insisted Olympe, with unmistakable anxiety; "pray—*pray* do not!

You cannot think how much I hold to this. I should be miserable if you did not come: nay, more—I am very superstitious, I know how wrong this is, and still I cannot help it—if you refuse me this prayer, I should regard it as a bad omen. Will you not come?" and the winning fondness of the tone in which these words were uttered, is not to be described. "You saved my life," she pursued, with sincere, with deep emotion. "Do not refuse my prayer—a *bride's* prayer!" she added: "you know, no one ever refuses *that*. Why, a convent friend of mine, who is at this moment in deep mourning, puts off her mourning for my sake, and comes to-morrow in white. Oh! *how* can you refuse me!" she asked, in a voice of unfeigned sorrow.

Lady Vernon trembled. Madame de la Roche Bermont's eyes were fixed upon her, as she thought, with unusual penetration. She turned to the Abbé, he looked very grave.

"In truth," he said, "it is scarcely well to refuse the first prayer made upon the threshold of wedded life: particularly when the acquiescence in the demand can but lead us into that sacred sanctuary where, no matter what our position, it is ever healthful we should go."

"Ah! Monsieur le Curé, how kind of you to help me!" exclaimed Olympe.

Mildred fixed upon M. de Nangis a scrutinizing glance: words could not plainer ask for a solution of her difficulties, nor could words more plainly have said, "*Go!*" than did the Abbé's look, and imperceptible inclination of the head.

"I will do as you wish," answered Lady Vernon, to Olympe.

Mademoiselle de la Roche Bermont shook her head pensively.

"You are doing it for M. le Curé," she said, "and I had hoped you might have done it for *me*."

Mildred drew the fair girl towards her, and,

pressing her to her heart—(oh! how it ached as it beat against the virgin bosom of Gaston's wife!)—

"I do it for *your* sake—and your sake *alone!*" she answered, firmly, but in a low voice.

When this painful scene, which had almost exhausted Lady Vernon's energies, was over, and she had returned from conducting her visitors to the outer door—

"My father!" she said, in tones of bitterness, and seizing the Abbé's hands in hers, "what *have* I done to deserve this!"

"You have left *too much undone*, my child," he gravely replied.

Mildred hung down her head, and thought of the garden at Montmorency.

* * * *

The morrow came. The beautiful brilliancy of the heavens seemed to mock the gloom which reigned supreme over two well-nigh broken hearts, which that day were to be

irrevocably severed; and the lazy wind, as it furled its wings, clogged with perfumes, amongst the acacias and limes, seemed to say that it would be the bearer of no sighs, save those of flowers.

The ceremony was to take place at the Madeleine; and at eleven o'clock, the bridegroom, his near relatives, and intimate friends, were to be assembled at Madame de la Roche Bermont's Hotel, in the Faubourg St. Honoré.

When Lady Vernon entered, Madame de Montévreux and Gaston were already in the drawing-room, tenanted, besides themselves, by fifteen or twenty people, all waiting for the completion of the bride's toilette, and all of whom were more or less known to one another.

Among the first who welcomed Mildred, was M. de Boislambert. Since the events of the last month, the General and Lady Vernon had felt instinctively drawn together, and united

in the bonds of a close and mysterious sympathy.

As soon as she was seated, Mildred cast a glance over the occupants of the apartment. Raoul de la Roche Bermont, who, as soon as his disastrous affairs were settled, had returned from his excursion to the frontiers, was engaged in a conversation with M. de Renneville, who, since the definitive fixing of the positive day for Olympe's marriage with her cousin, had relaxed a little, and consented to be reconciled to those whom he regarded as, with himself, the authors of his ward's misfortunes.

Madame de Montévreux was engaged with her sister-in-law, Madame de Sestrières, and a group of ladies ; and Gaston, occasionally speaking to one or other of the persons around, leaned against the chimney-piece in an attitude which *might* be explained to the bystanders by the natural solemnity of the occasion ; but which, to Lady Vernon, told a very different tale.

Upon the corner of the chimney-piece, close

to the Duke's elbow, lay a yet unfolded copy of the day's Galignani. Raoul, who had learned English, and who was an *habitué* of the balls at the British Embassy, had the—to his mother —inconceivable fancy of subscribing to the only English paper published in Paris.

There it lay — and, somehow or other— Mildred felt uneasy at its aspect! She would have given worlds to have snatched it from its place—or to have begged the General to bring it to her; yet she dared not. She sat upright and motionless, with her eyes riveted upon that paper, which some instinct told her was *not* indifferent to her. And now—see!— Gaston's arm has slipped a little upon the marble of the chimney-piece, and the paper lies upon the carpet.

Oh! if she dared!—it is so very near! M. de Montévreux looks at it vacantly, and then stoops —picks it up—but does not at once replace it on the chimney-piece — no! he abstractedly unfolds it, and glances over the articles extracted from the *Times* and

Chronicle. They do not interest him, for he restores the paper to its former resting-place.

His uncle, M. de Sestrières, talks to him about some changes to be proposed to the Chambers, touching the recruiting regulations in the army. Gaston answers;—the uncle continues, and soon the nephew, tired by the discussion, casts a weary glance upon the paper lying at his elbow;—the marriages, births, deaths, fêtes, and other "events in high life" arrest his attention: suddenly, his eye rests upon a paragraph,—it is a wonder he does not fall to the ground—for a man shot through the heart has the springs of life less rudely stopped. When his eyes are raised from the paper, they fix themselves upon Mildred. Oh! the thousand things that crowd into that one haggard look! How passion and reproach mingle together there!

M. de Sestrières puts to him some question relating to the mode of conscription in France, as compared with that adopted in Prussia and Austria.

"Apoplexy!" murmurs Gaston, and the fearful stare is unaverted from Lady Vernon's blanched face.

A moment more, and she will sink;—what will happen? A frightful anticipation crosses her brain as she feels the sharp ray of that burning glance penetrating through her eyelids, and hears M. de Sestrières say gaily to his nephew.

"You are thinking of something else;" to which Gaston, in a tone that makes her shudder, replies "I *am!*" what if—

The door opened, and the bride, accompanied by her mother, and some young female friends, entered.

Mildred rose involuntarily.

"Courage!" murmured a low voice at her elbow.

They were the kind, sympathetic tones of the General.

The Princess was seized upon by Madame de Montévreux and her group, who seemed intent upon some point of etiquette not yet

definitively settled. Every one was occupied so much more with his own concerns, than with those of his neighbours, that no living being—save, perhaps, the Marquis de Bois-lambert, had remarked the drama that was passing in that room. Gaston's gaze, like that of all persons more intent upon an idea than upon an individual, had not followed Lady Vernon, but remained fixed upon the *spot* where she had sat. Pale as a marble statue, Mildred advanced – the trembling hand of the lovely bride in her's—and, when they both stood side by side before Gaston—

"M. le Duc," she said, trying to smile; but meeting his eye with a look such as he only could understand. "*Madame la Duchesse de Montévreux !*"

No one saw what was passing, no one heard what was said. Gaston obeyed the all-powerful fascination Mildred exercised over his senses; he closed his eyes with an effort so forcible, that the orbs seemed literally to disappear, pressed inwards by the leaden lids;—and then,

bowing low to the fair, blushing, being before him, he pressed his ice-cold lips upon the hand placed in his by the woman whom, loving better than life, he renounced at the very instant when fate had set her free.

All was now, indeed, over, for Gaston and Mildred Vernon!

* * * *

As the brilliant marriage-train swept out of the gorgeous temple, Lady Vernon, leaning on the arm of the Marquis de Boislambert, felt her hand pressed by a woman's hand in the crowd. She turned, and perceived behind her the kneeling figure of a *Sœur de Charité*, who, with upturned eyes, seemed to be engaged in fervent prayer. Her features were emaciated, and the complexion sallow as that of some ivory statue of a saint.

From her soft, lovely, eyes, the exquisite tenderness of which none can describe, the tears streamed slowly; but they seemed tears of humble resignation; and the expression of

her face and her whole attitude, gave you the idea of one who prays *for*, and calls down blessings upon another. Mildred started, "*Louise!*" was the unuttered word which rose to her lips, but did not escape them.

"What?" said her companion. "Did any one speak?"

"No," she answered; "but I thought I saw. Turn round!"

They turned round, but nothing was to be seen, save an old crippled woman, who asked for alms, and to whom Lady Vernon gave her purse entire. They left the church: and the next day, all those who knew Mildred said: "Only think! how shocking! Poor Lady Vernon, on returning from Mademoiselle de la Roche Bermont's marriage, actually read the account of her husband's sudden death in the papers!"

And now, reader, if you are sufficiently interested in any of the personages of this tale to wish to know their fate, I will tell you, that, as

to Madame de Cévèzes, you may see her at the first ball, concert, *course*, or theatre, to which you may chance to go. She is still fair, frail, childish-looking, and pernicious as ever.

Madame de Boislambert has never been heard of again; but there exists in the parish of the Abbé de Nangis a certain sister of charity, called, like the unhappy Duchesse de la Vallière, Sœur Louise de la Miséricorde, whose principal employment is to attend upon those from whom contagion has driven their nearest friends.

The Duc de Montévreux and his young and lovely wife, form the delight of the dowager Duchess, who rejoices in their happiness, (which her son has never told her is *not* without a shade), and in the awakening intelligence of the infant heir to their noble house.

A very few months ago I met, on the banks of the Rhine, Lady Vernon. From the ruins of Rolandseck, a party of English people were looking down upon the convent below, where the self-sacrificed Hildegund had perished, a victim to love and honour. Different opinions

were expressed; and most of the men extolled to the skies the virtue of the poor recluse.

"Virtue!" said a tall, plain, elderly lady,—"God bless me! Virtue, I should hope, was easy enough!"

The sun was sinking behind the vine-clad hills that glass themselves in the Rhine's blue waters, and his last rays fell golden upon Lady Vernon's pale brow. She is generally very grave—so say those who know her well—but just then she looked more than usually sad; and I thought a tear glistened in her eye as it met mine. But her look said, with a clearness that has left the words stamped upon my memory: "Virtue is no *easy* thing!"

THE END.

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